Izumi Sawano
Illust. Miru Yumesaki

I want to Escape from Princess Lessons 2

I May Be on the Verge of Ruin, but I Want to Get Married!

Izumi Sawano
Illust. Miru Yumesaki
I want to Escape from Princess Lessons 2
I May Be on the Verge of Ruin, but I Want to Get Married!

Table of Contents

Cover

I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons 2: I May Be on the Verge of Ruin, but I Want to Get Married!

Side Story: In-Law Surprise

Side Story: Nadir’s First Love

Side Story: Telling His Parents

Side Story: How Ben Became a Butler

Afterword

Color Illustration

Bonus Short Story

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons 2: I May Be on the Verge of Ruin, but I Want to Get Married!

I was standing at the very edge of disaster.

“We’ll be ruined! Ruined!” I wailed, diving into my bed.

There was no longer anyone to admonish me that a lady of my station shouldn’t behave like this, for you see, as I’d just mentioned, my family was on the verge of ruin. All our servants were gone. A noble house without a single servant to its name was unheard of, but that was our reality at present. Even those who’d said they would stay had been dismissed.

At the risk of sounding repetitive, the reason was that we were on the brink of financial collapse. We simply couldn’t afford them.

And if being out of funds wasn’t bad enough, we also *owed* a large amount. At this point, there was only one way out of this mess.

I had to marry into money. There was no alternative.

“And yet! A suitable partner eludes me!” I cried out as my gala gown turned into a crumpled mess.

The door to my room opened, and there stood the lady of the house, the baroness.

“Brianna?” she asked upon seeing the state I was in. The baron, head of the house, was behind her. “Um, you don’t have to keep trying if it’s so taxing on you,” the baroness said with a melancholy furrow of her brows. “Don’t worry about us.”

I sat up abruptly. “No, mother!” I protested. “I’ve only just begun!”

This was no time to be discouraged! So what if I hadn’t been able to find myself a partner at the most recent ball? I would simply have to try harder at the next one!

The two of them looked troubled by my words. Ah, I hadn’t meant to make them feel that way—I simply *had* to find myself a rich man and repay

their kindness!

My determination renewed, I clenched my fist.

***

I'd been living in this house for twelve years. Truthfully, I wasn't this couple's biological daughter; I was but a lucky girl, plucked from an orphanage, born to unknown parents. But although the baron and baroness weren't my parents by blood, they had raised me with such love and care that it felt as if they'd been my parents all my life.

They hadn't been blessed with children, you see, and so they'd chosen to take me in as a young girl, simply because they wished for a daughter. And also because, in this country, women were allowed to inherit noble titles.

Thanks to them, I grew up in a loving environment and was educated as an heiress. And since I was to be a baroness—a low-ranking noble—they'd even told me that they would allow me to marry a commoner, as long as I loved the man. And so, I had lived in blissful, unambitious ignorance, thinking I could simply take a good-natured man of common stock as a husband one day.

Reality was not quite so gentle. Everything had turned on its head about two years ago.

Father was conned out of all of his wealth, taken advantage of for his kindness. In a flash, our family was reduced to a mere title and a pile of debt.

Seeing my adoptive parents in tears, weeping over the end of their noble house that had endured for generations, I made a decision.

I would marry a man of means.

Fortunately for me, I was young, and had developed voluptuous curves; the plan, then, was to find a man who would be attracted to my assets. Indeed, I had been courted by several men. My adoptive parents, however, weren't having it.

"Don't be a second wife! Or a mistress, for that matter!" they'd scold me.

You see, the offers of courtship I had received were mostly from older men in their fifties or sixties, saying they would give me as much money as I needed, but that they wouldn't take me as their primary wife, only as a

side piece.

Who knew having such a voluptuous body could have such harmful side effects?

My parents loved me. They would've rather died than seen me sell myself like that. And truthfully, I too had dreams of marriage. As such, my family collectively agreed that I shouldn't rush into becoming someone's second wife. Instead, I was to take my time in finding a partner.

And yet, two years had passed in the blink of an eye, and I was now nineteen—the upper limit of marriageable age. The situation had grown dire. Ruin was at hand.

Besides managing our lands, I had been able to pay interest on our debt using my side income, which I'd been earning for that express purpose. Thus, the debt collectors had been quite patient with us, but at last, they had made an ultimatum: either we paid what we owed in six months, or it would all be over.

Honestly, I'd been naive. I was young and attractive, and that had gotten to my head. I'd been so certain that I'd find a man to save our family.

But reality was harsh.

Most decent men kept their distance due to our debt. When someone approached me in hopes of inheriting our title, they'd see the amount our family owed and balk, saying that such a low-ranking title wasn't worth it. They'd say, "I would have considered it, were this at least for the title of count."

"Ugh!" I groaned, pounding my bed in frustration. "And I was so sure I'd landed the crown prince!"

Like something straight out of a fairy tale, His Highness had chosen me as his companion for the ball. Why, I'd been more than delighted to attend. But, as it turned out, I'd been nothing but a pawn in his little love game with his fiancée.

How cruel. Here I'd been, thinking I'd found myself an honest man who saw beyond my breasts—and the crown prince, no less!—only to be used as nothing but jealousy material. Cruel indeed.

"I should've charged him for my services as a pawn," I grumbled.

He might've paid if I'd asked, actually. Perhaps it wasn't too late. I could simply send him an invoice.

"U-Um, Brianna?" my mother said, confused.

Oh. Right. My parents. At the door.

I coughed in an attempt to hide my embarrassment at being seen in such a state by my beloved family.

“Um, you’ve received an invitation to a ball,” she continued, handing me the envelope.

“Thank you, mother,” I replied with a smile.

Looking somewhat relieved, my parents left the room. I opened the invitation, and written on it was a rather unexpected name.

“Nadir Dorman,” I read aloud.

That was the name of the older brother of the true love—now wife—of the crown prince who had used me as a pawn.

***

Nadir Dorman.

A name I was all too familiar with. *He* was the one who had gotten me into this mess, after all.

That day, as every other day, I’d been searching for a marriage partner when the crown prince approached me, smiling radiantly.

No way, right? That couldn’t have been real, now could it?

To me, having all but lost the innocent, maidenly dreams in my heart to the burdens of debt, it had been nothing short of a miracle.

That was when I met Nadir too. He’d been standing behind His Highness, and frankly I’d initially thought him the prince’s attendant.

Even to my eyes, jaded after the abundance of men I’d encountered, the crown prince was beautiful. Truly princely. His aura was on a whole new level.

And so I was absolutely ecstatic when he asked, “Would you accompany me to the next ball?”

My perseverance had paid off. I was about to score the best possible marriage candidate. I was beside myself when I attended the party. Words could not describe the sense of superiority I felt when greeting the prince’s so-called fiancée. I was so certain that His Highness had chosen me! It would be no exaggeration to call that moment the happiest of my life until that point.

Said happiness lasted but an instant, of course.

“I cannot keep you company today,” the prince told his fiancée.

She looked at him and replied, “Will you be accompanying her, then?”

Her eyes were moist, as if filled with longing. At the time, I thought this was sadness, but later I would come to learn just how horribly mistaken I’d been.

His Highness looked away from her. “My apologies.”

“Does that mean our betrothal is...” She trailed off.

“It does,” he confirmed.

His fiancée looked at us both, then jumped for joy. And I don’t mean that figuratively. She genuinely raised her hands in the air and began to hop ecstatically.

“Finally!” she exclaimed.

“Pardon?”

Her refined aura from moments ago was gone, and she excitedly called out to Nadir, who stood behind the prince.

“Did you hear that, brother?” she exclaimed. “Did you hear? You heard it loud and clear, yes?!”

“I did,” Nadir said flatly.

“At last! At long last!” She joined her hands in prayer over her chest and gazed up at the heavens, as if thanking the divine. Clearly riding her wave of excitement, she continued, “What a horrid ten years it has been! Ever since my betrothal to the crown prince at the age of seven, day after day, it’s just been study, study, study, study, dance, dance, dance, dance! And, oh, the incessant tea parties! Awful! Every! Last! One!”

“L-Leticia?” The prince’s tone, soft until this point, changed. Well, it was no wonder. Her sudden change in demeanor had caught me by surprise too.

“I’m criticized for any and every thing I do! If I so much as laugh out loud, why, I’m too vulgar! But did my doing so inconvenience anyone? No, of course not! If I happen to be in a bit of a hurry and break into a jog, I’m improper! Faultfinding, so much faultfinding!”

“Lettie?”

“I was resigned to it,” she continued. “What else could I do? But now I don’t need to be! This is amazing! And it’s all thanks to you, ah... What was it? Buh...Be...Bre...Brie?”

“It’s *Brianna*!”

I'd been quietly listening to her tirade, but I *had* to correct her. What did she think she was doing, giving me such an odd nickname so casually?!

Yes, perhaps it was a suitable nickname given my actual name and my doubtless *grating* act, but uh, rude? My act was all about winning the crown prince's hand in marriage! I wouldn't have acted that way had I not needed to! Hmph!

The prince's fiancée, whom I now knew to be named Leticia, had a clearly fake look of remorse on her face as she said, "Please pardon my indiscretion. That was rather *cheesy* of me."

"Do you mean to mock me?!" I demanded.

"Perhaps a little, but I truly *am* grateful!" she exclaimed. "Thank you so much for taking on this bad debt!"

"Bad...debt," I echoed, words momentarily escaping me at her outrageous way of referring to royalty.

"I can hardly believe you're willing to suffer through being cooped up in a castle ten hours a day every day, studying, dancing, enduring the nobles' harassment at tea parties, all in my stead! Best of luck to you! I'll be rooting for you!"

"Um..." I mumbled, frozen in shock. I hadn't heard anything about that!

Not caring in the slightest about my plight, she turned to Nadir once more.

"Ah, brother, but you *must* be heartbroken! It was *you* who *forced* me into this engagement, after all! Please, *do* find some other means to establish ties with the royal family!"

"Of course," her brother replied.

"Lord Clarke found himself a wonderful woman, so you'll keep your promise to allow me freedom, yes?!"

"Of course," he said once again, a defeated look on his face.

"Ha ha! I'm free as a bird!" she exclaimed. "Goodbye, ladyhood! I'm moving to the countryside! I'll go fishing, and then fish some more, climb trees, prance about with the village children, work the fields, and laugh with my mouth wide open!"

The way she spoke, one might've thought she was actually dumping the prince onto me. She merrily strode out of the venue. I could only stare in bewilderment at her swift departure, with the gnawing feeling that I was in over my head and needed to distance myself from the crown prince.

Before I had the chance to, however, I was caught. Not by the prince, mind you, but by the runaway lady's brother, Nadir, future Duke Dorman.

"Lady Brianna, where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"Oh, I simply thought it would be best for me to take my leave now," I told him with a polite smile, though inside I was sweating bullets.

"Are you not with His Highness?"

"Well, we did not make any arrangements for the future, you see." I wasn't lying. The only thing I'd agreed to was to accompany him to the ball, after all.

I could sense trouble brewing and wanted to leave immediately, but Nadir did not release my shoulders. In fact, his grip on them tightened. His determination not to let me leave was palpable.

"But you see," he said, "His Highness's fiancée has run away. A replacement is necessary. Surely you understand this."

"No," I replied. "No, I do not."

"And she caused such a commotion besides. It calls for punishment, no?"

The low tone in which he spoke sent shivers down my spine. I stood my ground, however.

"I *would* consider becoming his fiancée, but not as a replacement. As the real deal," I told him boldly.

He grinned in response. My back was quickly growing damp with cold sweat.

"Very well," he said. "If you can endure the education necessary to become a princess, we'll consider it." He turned to the crown prince. "Are we in agreement, Your Highness?"

"Yes." The ease with which the prince accepted Nadir's proposal left me stunned.

Taking princess lessons meant I was a serious contender to be Prince Clarke's fiancée. But candidates for such a position were carefully chosen based on their qualities and family background, not something to be decided this flippantly. Not only that, these two men were making this decision unilaterally.

If the crown prince had fancied me, I could've understood this choice being made at his insistence. However, he wasn't even looking at me, and simply kept staring in the direction his fiancée had run off to. It could not be

any clearer where his affections lay.

I looked over at Nadir, who still had not released my shoulders. His eyes bored straight into me, and he made no effort to hide that a plot was brewing behind them.

They'd set me up.

And by the time that fact dawned on me, it was already too late.

Why do these things only ever happen to me?

Internally crying tears of despair, all I could do was glare at Nadir.

***

I threw in the towel immediately.

Those princess lessons had been harsh. Very much so.

You see, the household I had been raised in was one that hadn't been particularly strict about the refinement and manners expected of a lady. As a future baroness, I was only minimally cultured, and thus I lacked the grace and knowledge to stand beside the prince.

What I *was* good at were math, business deals, and estate management. Higher-ranked ladies seldom learned such things, and this knowledge was looked down upon by higher-ranked noblemen. That was one of the reasons why I wasn't particularly popular among aristocrats of finer stock. I'd never bothered to hide the fact that, as heiress to a barony, my education had been focused on economics and management, and so it was well-known.

Princess lessons, focusing mainly on ladylike etiquette, were a poor fit for me.

I had only the barest of manners, and in the eyes of my tutors, that'd been unpardonable. They'd yelled at me and punished me, and I'd been given no breaks at all. Pure hell.

Not only that, I was fully aware that these nightmarish lessons would bear no fruit, which only added to my despair.

The prince had no intention of marrying me at all. I hadn't even met with him since the night of his fiancée's escape. It didn't take a creative genius to imagine how little interest he had in me.

"That's it. I'm done. This is killing me," I told Nadir when he came to check on me.

He gave me an appraising look. "Oh dear. Have your cheeks grown a

little gaunt?”

“Yes. Yes they have. I’ve lost weight,” I said plainly, not bothering with polite language or showing respect toward him anymore. He had to have noticed, but he said nothing. And I’d been trying so hard to annoy him too, knowing that a lady of lower stature had likely never spoken to him on equal terms! Alas.

Frustrated, I ground my teeth, much to his apparent enjoyment.

“Your chest hasn’t reduced in size one bit, though,” he commented.

“This is harassment!” I snapped.

How dare he! I’d heard such comments before, in a more roundabout manner that befitted nobility, such as, “Your figure is quite well-rounded,” and, “Lucky is the man who gets to have you in his embrace,” but never something so blatant!

I crossed my arms, as if to shield myself from his scrutiny, but that only further emphasized my cleavage. Damn you, body!

Realizing the futility of my efforts, I let my arms drop and glared at him, but that only seemed to further his amusement. What a *wonderful* man.

“I could set you free,” he said.

Confused, I tilted my head. What did he mean, “set me free”? Wait... Was he talking about the princess lessons?!

“You mean it?!” I exclaimed.

“Yes. His Highness has declared he will not have children with anyone but Leticia,” Nadir explained.

Well, if he had indeed made such a claim, my role was over. For a number of days after Leticia had run away, I’d stayed confined until the preparations for my princess lessons were complete. And today, they had actually begun. A single day without a proper meal had made me lose weight, but my chest hadn’t shrunk at all.

Ah, finally, my days of hardship were over. I was so grateful that I didn’t even care that my efforts had been in vain. Though I’d only gone through one day of princess lessons, I could tell it would be absolutely impossible for me to be a bona fide candidate for crown princess and endure those torturous classes. I was elated that they’d ended early.

Just as I trembled with joy at these thoughts, *someone* rained on my parade.

“There will be conditions, however,” Nadir said.

I looked at him in surprise. “Huh?”

“First of all,” he began, conspicuously sticking a finger out in front of my face, “you need to tell everyone and their mother’s little dog about the lessons you went through.”

“What?”

He wanted me to talk about the princess lessons? I couldn’t fathom why.

When I tilted my head in confusion, Nadir explained, “Leticia believes her personality to be crude and unfit for a crown princess. So I would like you to speak openly of how harsh the lessons were, and how you readily gave up on them, as well as how impressive Leticia is for enduring them for ten years.”

Ah. So *that* was why he went to the trouble of putting me through those lessons. The man was a strategist indeed. I wasn’t sure what Leticia would think, but if the story spread to the public, there would likely be an outpouring of support for her as the future crown princess.

Truly I was a tool for him to use.

Though I couldn’t stifle a sigh, I wasn’t in a position to refuse. Reluctantly, I agreed to this condition.

Seemingly satisfied with my reply, Nadir raised a second finger. “Second,” he said coldly, the corners of his mouth curling up, “you’ll do exactly as I tell you.”

***

As instructed, I’d gone to meet with the prince’s fiancée.

“Remember. You need to capture her,” Nadir told me.

“Capture her?” I asked. “What is she, a wild animal?”

“She may as well be.”

How could a noblewoman possibly be close to being a wild animal?

“The idea is to bring Leticia back to the royal palace, yes?” I asked.

“Correct,” he confirmed, nodding. “His Highness ought to be speaking with Leticia by now. Then, I’ll go and meet with her. My sister is bound to realize a storm is coming. She *will* run away. Guaranteed.”

“You sure sound convinced of it.”

“She’s not the type of person to listen when you ask her to behave. Making her run away on purpose is the way to catch her,” he explained.

I could hardly believe the man was talking about his own sister.

“You two *are* siblings, yes? You share the same blood and everything?”

“We are proper brother and sister, born of the same parents, yes.”

“And you have no intention to respect your own sister’s wishes?”

“Political marriages are a given for nobles, no?”

Sadly, this wasn’t quite what I’d been told growing up, so I didn’t really understand where he was coming from.

I was so grateful to my adoptive parents for not being the kind to pawn off their own daughter for money! And I was very grateful I didn’t have a brother who would pawn off his own sister for power!

“I know you’re thinking something rude,” he remarked.

Sweating at my own transparency, I managed to force an awkward smile.

“Either way, you want my assistance in keeping your sister from escaping,” I said. “Got it, got it.”

“You don’t need to say that twice,” he snapped.

Why was I, at this age, being scolded by this man as if he were my mother? Inconsiderate prick.

Said prick knocked on the door of an estate—significantly smaller than the one at the capital—and a woman, a maid by the looks of her, answered immediately and let us in.

“Are you well?” he asked his sister.

“Brother!” snapped Leticia, ignoring his attempt at pleasantries. “What’s this about my engagement still standing?!”

It was only natural she’d confront him this quickly, I supposed. Most likely she’d been overjoyed to think that her engagement had been broken off, only for the prince to then promptly follow up with a declaration that it, in fact, had not. Doubtless she’d never imagined this could happen.

“It would appear His Highness has not, in fact, broken it off,” he said.

“What?!” she retorted, frantically pressing for an explanation. “But back then he said we were no longer—”

“Try and remember, Leticia. Did he categorically state your engagement was broken off?”

For a moment, she froze, the color quickly draining from her cheeks. The realization that those crucial words had never been explicitly spoken had likely hit her.

At the ball, His Highness had only replied vaguely to her statements. Not only that, every other person present at the venue had been planted by Nadir.

“He...did not explicitly say our engagement was broken off,” she admitted dejectedly.

“Indeed he did not,” Nadir agreed.

“What’s going on, then?!”

“It would appear he never intended to break it off in the first place.”

“What?!”

I felt a little sorry for her in her confused state. Her brother had set her up to deliberately misunderstand things, after all. Anyone would have gotten the wrong idea in that situation, not just Leticia.

But, from my perspective, being loved by someone like that was something to be desired, and so I decided to stop sympathizing. I was envious!

“He wanted to make you jealous, it seems,” Nadir explained.

“J-Jealous?” Leticia stammered.

“Yes. As in, upset he was showing interest in—”

“I know what ‘jealous’ means!” she cut in.

It appeared as though Leticia did not understand the prince’s plan.

“His Highness fancies you, it seems,” her brother explained.

“He did say something like that earlier...” she said.

“You never paid him any attention, so he wanted to test you.”

“And even through his test I paid him no mind,” she retorted.

Poor Prince Clarke, rejected so thoroughly!

“Indeed. But it would seem he was quite happy you actually looked at his face for once.”

Earlier, before we’d come to this estate, His Highness had been in a much better mood than before at the ball.

“Huh? How do you know about that when it *just* happened?!” Leticia demanded.

“I was the one who brought His Highness here,” Nadir said nonchalantly.

“You *what*?!” Clearly she hadn’t expected that, given how she raised her voice.

Indeed. Her own flesh and blood had betrayed her. Hopefully she would

take it as a lesson to be learned, and be more cautious in the future.

Unbothered by Leticia's outburst, Nadir continued, "He said that now that you have a reason to get to know him, he wouldn't mind it if you only fell for him after the marriage. He was, however, concerned about how quickly you ran off to one of our territories, so he's making arrangements."

"What arrangements?" she asked, her face turning pale.

"For the wedding ceremony."

"Nooo!" she cried out in despair, clearly unable to handle the news that her wedding preparations were still underway. Losing even more color, she implored her brother to do something.

Also, I'd been standing there that entire time. Hello?

"Um, have you considered, perhaps, *not ignoring me*?" I asked quietly to put a stop to the siblings' never-ending quarrel.

Leticia's eyes widened, as if she'd only just noticed me.

"Ah, yes, I'd forgotten all about her," Nadir spoke up. "She said she wanted to see you, Leticia, so I brought her here."

"You *forgot*?!" I snapped at his nonchalance. This was not the kind of thing one simply forgot!

He, however, seemed unfazed.

"Be... Buh... Brie!" Leticia exclaimed, seemingly having given up on remembering my name and using her made-up nickname for me instead.

"It's *Brianna*!" I corrected her. What a tasteless girl, giving me such a rude nickname!

Leticia tilted her head curiously and said, "So, Brie, I don't mean to *grill* you, but you look different."

"*Bri-an-na*!" I reminded her yet again.

"What happened to the croquettish—I mean, *coquettish* act?"

"I'm over it!"

Perhaps she'd sensed a change in me since our first meeting, because she eyed me as if asking why that had happened.

"I thought I had a chance when the prince approached me, you know! Turns out, he's head over heels for you! I was just part of his little test. What a joke!" I said, clenching my fist as I spoke. "*And* because of that whole kerfuffle, *my* punishment was to take those horrid princess lessons for who knows what reason! They make no sense! They're so strict! What's up with that?! Who scolds people for happening to yawn?! Isn't yawning

just a thing people do?!”

“It sure is,” she agreed with a nod.

“I knew you’d understand!” I exclaimed, clasping her hands. Of course she understood! She’d wanted to escape so badly!

Given how all anyone had done until this point was disparage me, something so simple as having someone relate to me touched my heart. Nadir, the mastermind behind this ploy, wouldn’t have been sympathetic to my plight.

“You’re incredible,” I told her. “You survived *ten years* of that?! I could *never*. I barely lasted a day.”

“Don’t give up!” she said as if to encourage me. “You can do it!”

“No can do!”

“I mean, you could become the crown princess!”

“Not a chance in hell! The prince has categorically stated that if he marries anyone but you, he will not have children!”

She’d probably been saying all that in an attempt to get out of the engagement, but when she heard those words, she froze.

“It would seem His Highness has no interest in marrying anyone else,” Nadir said, seemingly amused as he cruelly laid the reality of the situation on his sister. “I would suggest you give up.”

“Noooooooo!”

***

Although they didn’t seem to get along well, Nadir was Leticia’s older brother through and through. He could anticipate her every move.

Just as he’d predicted, she tried to escape, jumping down from the second-floor window.

She nailed her landing, impressively enough, but the shock must’ve gotten to her, since she groaned a bit, gripping her legs. Still, she soon recovered, picked up the suitcase she’d dropped, and started running.

“No you don’t,” I said, stepping on the hem of her dress before she could take off.

Leticia stumbled and fell face-first to the ground. That must’ve hurt! Still, I couldn’t withdraw my foot.

“If you run, *I’ll* be the one stuck with those princess lessons!” I said.

Having recognized me, Leticia desperately tried to break free and escape.

“I thought you sympathized with me earlier today!” she protested.

“I certainly did, but not to the point I would let you run away,” I explained.

“Wow! And here I thought we might’ve bonded the teeniest tiniest bit!”

“That’s not what this is about and you know it!”

She struggled to try and run away but couldn’t pull the hem free. Hmph! Do not underestimate the leg strength of a former commoner!

“They told me that if you go back, I’ll be free of these princess lessons,” I told her. “I won’t let you escape!”

That wasn’t exactly true, but who knows what her brother would’ve said if I’d let her run.

“Just look the other way!” she suggested.

“And why would I do that?!”

“You’ll be queen in my stead! Wouldn’t that be great?”

“I already said I’m over it!”

Her escape strategy seemed to have switched to cajolery, but I wasn’t going to fall for that. The crux of the matter was that the prince only had eyes for her, so her words held no weight at all.

“Leticia, would you stop making a racket in the middle of the night?” Nadir said, having finally deigned to grace us with his presence, not bothering to hide his annoyance.

What, had he been planning to leave dealing with her solely to me while he slept soundly? His face implied he’d been asleep! This man!

“Brother! Do something about Brie!” Leticia said.

“How many times must I tell you it’s *Brianna*?!” I snapped.

Nadir simply ignored his sister’s demands, and so, cornered, she turned to me and blurted out, “If you let me go, I’ll give you my brother’s hand in marriage!”

At those words, I froze, staring intently at Leticia’s face. “What was that?”

“He’s the heir to a duchy, twenty-two years old, brilliant, athletic, tall, *and* quite handsome! It would be no exaggeration to claim your future would be guaranteed! I mean, yes, his personality could use a *little* work, but if you can look past that, he’s a great catch! What do you say?!”

“Deal!”

I removed my foot. Leticia immediately stood up, wiping the beads of sweat that had formed on her brow during the struggle.

“Thank you!” she exclaimed. “I won’t forget you two! Brother, have a wonderful love life!”

“H-Hey!” Nadir protested. “Leticia!”

“To freedom!” she yelled, bolting away.

I watched her go before turning my gaze to Nadir, eliciting a shudder from him. Clearly he hadn’t been expecting this turn of events, and his expression turned to one of horror as I crept closer to him.

“Hey!” he snapped. “Calm down!”

“I *am* calm!” I replied. “Why, you could’ve just told me sooner that you’re not spoken for! You’re of suitable age, easy on the eyes, the heir to a duchy, and yes, your personality is quite awful, but I can put up with that much at least—all things considered, you’re a fantastic catch!”

My adoptive parents would be satisfied with this, I thought. It was multiple times better than becoming the side piece to a rich, fat, middle-aged man.

“I hadn’t considered you an option on the assumption that a higher-ranked noble like you must already be betrothed to someone, and also because of your terrible character, but knowing that you *are* available changes everything!”

“Don’t casually slip in insults!”

Ah. So he had noticed my repeated mentions of his unpleasant personality.

But, you see, that was purely fact, so I wasn’t going to back down on that point. Instead, I sidled up to him before abruptly throwing my arms around him and knocking him over in the process. I didn’t intend to actually *do* anything to him, of course—perish the thought—but I hoped if I could rough up our clothes a bit and get us seen by whoever was following us around—a subordinate of his, of the prince’s, anyone really—then Nadir would be unable to deny that something had happened. A marriage would be in the bag.

“Hey! This isn’t funny!” he protested.

“Good thing that it’s not a joke, then, hmm?” I said. “It’s simply the only way to make you take responsibility.”

“You can’t be seriously—”

Color drained from his cheeks as I touched his chest, but I couldn’t afford to care. Caring meant defeat.

“A shotgun marriage is my only option!”

“Get back! Stay away from me!”

Here we go!

I tried to take off his pants, but of course, he resisted. The belt around his waist made an unpleasant sound as we wrestled for it. I kept pulling, knowing it was in the bag if the belt broke, but he wasn’t having it.

Amid the sounds of our ragged breaths, Nadir tried to push me off him with his foot. I'd been so focused on his trousers that I was easily kicked away, tumbling backward.

"Ow!" I protested angrily. "What kind of man throws a woman around like that?!"

"Quiet!" he yelled back. "What kind of woman attacks a man like...that...?"

His words trailed off toward the end of his sentence. Puzzled, I turned to look at him.

Nadir was staring at me. Specifically, at a part of my dress that had rolled up significantly during the scuffle. Now, you might think he was ogling, but no. When I say he was staring, I mean he was looking at me like one might look at a book. Not that my panicked brain could tell the difference at the time.

"Eek!"

Look, I know it might seem too late to talk about modesty, but I did have it! As you may remember, I very, very much did *not* want to actually do anything. This was not going according to plan.

"Hey! Stop staring!" I demanded, trying to fix my skirt. Nadir grabbed my hand, sending a chill down my spine. "Wait. You're joking, right? This is a joke?"

I forced a smile, but Nadir's hand moved to my dress.

"Eek! Nooo! We can't do this before marriage!"

He clicked his tongue. "Quiet down!"

Nadir easily pinned me down as I kicked and screamed with all my might, fearing for my chastity. At that moment, I became acutely aware of the difference in strength between men and women.

"W-Wait," I pleaded. "Seriously..."

This might be the end...

My eyes grew misty, and I was about to give up as Nadir slowly rolled up my skirt. *It's over,* I thought, ready to stop struggling.

But his hand moved no farther. Which is to say, he never exposed *that* part.

Something's not right.

Hesitantly, I looked at him. Nadir was staring intently at my legs, thinking about something. Thank goodness my underwear wasn't visible.

What, did he have a leg fetish? He did, didn't he?

"Um," I mumbled.

My voice brought him back from his stupor. Seemingly taken aback, he pulled away. I took the chance to fix my skirt.

"Um," I repeated.

"Now why would I ever be content with such a meager body?!" he snapped, not looking at me. Then he quickly stormed off, leaving me there in a daze.

"What the hell?" was all I could say to that.

***

"What's his problem?!"

I took off my dress and discarded it before leaping into my bed. His Highness had safely captured Leticia, supposedly, and she should've now been at the palace.

However, I couldn't have cared less. It wasn't that tomboy who was occupying my thoughts; it was her older brother.

"How dare he gaze at my legs like that only to say such outrageous things!"

Normally, people focused exclusively on my chest, you see, but my legs? My legs were secretly my pride and joy. They weren't delicate and slender like those of sheltered ladies, oh no. I was a hard worker! I had muscles! My legs were toned and *quite* attractive, thank you very much.

"How dare he say my body is meager?!"

It wasn't! It was too voluptuous!

"I'll never forgive the bastard," I murmured, my voice dripping with resentment, and pushed my face into the pillow.

Still, his actions at the time had been at odds with his words.

"Does that mean I have a chance?" I wondered aloud. One did not simply lift up the dress of a woman they disliked, after all. "Hell yes! Rich husband, here I—"

"Brianna, would you like to take a bath?" my mother asked calmly, paying no heed to my burning passions.

"Yes, please!" I replied.

A bath sounded perfect. I was going to get squeaky clean and dazzling,

and then shoot my shot! Repeatedly! Until it landed!

Lady Luck was on my side, you see, because the crown prince had requested that I be Leticia's conversation partner—an arrangement made so Leticia would feel less like a prisoner at the castle. Would that he'd shown *me* that kindness!

I pumped myself up, determined to make this work. "I can do it! I just need to keep trying!"

"Brianna, your bath..."

My mother, however, seemed less than thrilled.

***

Thankfully, an opportunity quickly presented itself to me.

I chanced upon Nadir at the palace, and called out to him in my best flirty voice as I approached. "Lord Naaadir!"

He gave me a blatantly displeased look in return.

See, I was at the castle due to the whole "being Leticia's conversation partner" business. Quite literally a business, really, as I was paid a small stipend each time. Wonderful, truly.

And when I say small, I do mean *small*, but I believed it was coming out of the prince's own pocket, so I didn't quite mind. It wasn't as though I disliked speaking to Leticia, after all, and she'd been opening up to me of late, I felt.

"What a maaarvelous coincidence," I said.

"Aren't you here for Leticia?" Nadir asked. "Just go."

"Oh myyy, but even your indifference is charming!"

Nadir said nothing in response, looking at me like I was some sort of cryptid. Rude. Very rude indeed.

But I wouldn't let such minor things discourage me. I took great pride in my mental fortitude. Which, considering the unspeakable amount of debt my family was in, had to be quite steely indeed, or I'd have dropped dead from shock already.

"Are you headed to meet with His Highness, my looord?" I asked Nadir.

He clicked his tongue. All I did was ask a question! Goodness. Without gracing me with an answer, he began to briskly walk away, so I hurried after him.

“L-Lord Nadir!” I called after him. “Please waaait!”

He stopped. “Quit talking like that,” he said sternly.

“Oh. Apologies,” I replied, straightening my back and dropping the elongated vowels. That had bothered him, apparently.

“You didn’t speak like that before,” he pointed out.

True. This manner of speaking was intentional—a persona I’d created for flattering others.

“Tell me,” he said, stepping closer and gripping my shoulders, peering into my face. He certainly was keen on touching me, wasn’t he? “You never used to speak like that in the past. Right?”

“Um, that’s right,” I stammered.

What did he mean by “in the past”? It wasn’t as though we were old acquaintances or anything...

I nodded despite the lingering questions in my mind, and Nadir left, seeming satisfied with that.

My attempt at flirting had been a complete disaster.

***

Why give up after one or two failures? That was a loser’s mindset.

“And that’s why I came to see you again!” I explained.

“Out,” Nadir snapped.

Wow. Told to go home immediately.

Since he hadn’t appreciated my flattering manner of speech, I was back to talking normally. He knew what I was like when I wasn’t pretending. Not that he liked *that* either. Hmph.

“What’s the issue?” I asked. “Tell me. I’ll fix what I can.”

His reply didn’t change. “Out.”

But considering he’d allowed me inside his home despite my unannounced visit, I remained optimistic. I had to be positive to push forward!

“See, if you marry me, you can ogle my chest all you like,” I offered.

“Doesn’t saying that make you sad?” he countered.

Of course it did! I would’ve preferred not to behave in such an unseemly manner, had I the choice! Which I didn’t!

“Well, what else am I supposed to do?!” I asked. “My body is the only

weapon at my disposal!”

“You poor thing,” he said, sympathizing with me. I wished he wouldn’t! That only made it hurt more! It would’ve been less painful for him to call me a filthy hussy. *Please stop.*

“Well, what about my legs?” I said. “You could touch them to your heart’s content!”

“Hey!” he called out. “There’s a pervert in here! Someone get her out!”

“Oh! No, no, I’m sorry!” I apologized hastily. “Please don’t ask your butler to kick me out! Wait, wait!”

When the butler arrived, I raised both hands in surrender to signal I’d meant no harm. The man looked at me, then at Nadir, then back at me in contemplation. Then, seemingly having realized something, he clapped his hands.

“Oh! I see! Young Master Nadir, you two are...you know,” he said, joining his curled fingers and thumbs into a heart shape.

“You’re fired,” Nadir said.

“Don’t destroy my livelihood!” cried the butler, who barely looked older than me. His voice took on a sorrowful tone as he desperately apologized to his master. “Please, Young Master! However will I survive out on the streets?! Have mercy!”

“Oh, shut up,” Nadir snapped. “And don’t call me ‘Young Master.’”

“But I’m so used to saying it!” the butler protested. Then, he suddenly turned to me, and said, “Oh! How about I kick her out?!” Perhaps he thought that would absolve him of blame.

I was so taken aback by the butler’s familiar manner of speaking to his master—and by the fact that Nadir simply allowed it—that I was too slow to react. In one swift motion, the butler picked me up, carried me to the estate’s front door, and unceremoniously dumped me there.

“Hey!” I cried out. “Don’t just toss people around!”

Ignoring my protests, the butler simply returned to his original spot at the door, whistling innocently as if nothing had happened. Nadir’s personality was truly something, but this butler wasn’t that far behind!

Despite having ordered the butler to kick me out, Nadir stood before me, with a mocking expression on his face.

“Don’t waste your time,” he said. “If you show up here again, I’m telling your parents.”

“No!” I pleaded, lowering my forehead to the ground to grovel in earnest. “Please leave my parents out of this. I beg of you.”

Anything but my family! They wouldn’t scold me, see; they’d feel guilty, thinking they were putting me through hardship, and cry!

“Hmph,” Nadir scoffed. “Behave, then.”

With my parents in the picture, I had no choice but to back down. During my reluctant walk home, I realized how dejected I actually felt. Maybe my emotional fortitude wasn’t quite so steely as I’d thought. That was a bit disheartening.

But I wasn’t about to give up just yet!

“Father! Mother! I’ve got this!” I declared, blissfully unaware of the odd looks I was getting from passersby as my fighting spirit blazed on.

***

“Oh, Brie! It’s been a while!”

I’d been so preoccupied with Nadir that I hadn’t visited Leticia for some time. When I finally stopped by the palace, she immediately had her maid, Maria, bring over a large quantity of sweets.

I thought she’d mentioned recently that she’d put on weight. Huh.

Not that I brought it up, of course. Instead, I indulged in the pastries. As ever, the cookies from the high-end bakery the royal family was partial to were delightfully crunchy, with a mellow and buttery flavor. I ate one, then another, as Leticia glowered at me.

“You know I’m worried about my weight, yet you keep stuffing your face with cookies,” she said. “Bully.”

“You’re the one who asked for these,” I pointed out. *She* was the one behind the heaps of confections piling up high before us. The audacity!

“I mean, yes, but still...” She trailed off, bristling as she looked over at the mountain of cookies I was munching on. Doubtless she was self-conscious about her weight gain, because she was dying to eat some, but refrained. “It’s the pastries’ fault! They’re simply too delicious. You agree, don’t you?”

“Well, *I’m* not gaining any weight.”

“Good for you! It all goes straight to your chest!” she quipped. “My weight just collects at my waist!”

Ooh, I'd hit a nerve. Leticia gave in to temptation, snatched a cookie, and ate it. Instantly, the anger left her eyebrows. I swear, she was so easy to read!

The crown prince must be fond of this side of her, I thought as I sipped the tea Maria had brewed for us. *Ah, what an exquisite flavor...*

"So," Leticia said, in a better mood after eating her cookie. "Why haven't you been coming over?"

"Well," I began, "I've been busy with debt repayments, and this, and that, and trying to get Nadir to maybe marry me, and..."

"Huh?!" she exclaimed in amazement. "You haven't given up on my brother yet?!"

“Speaking of which,” I said, “you told me when you first tried to escape that you’d give me Nadir’s hand in marriage! Except you couldn’t!”

“Well, you know,” Leticia said, “I don’t have that kind of authority! I was just saying the first thing that came to mind!”

The way she walked back her words with her chest proudly puffed up was more than a little irritating. She must’ve noticed my displeasure, though, because she offered me more cookies. Well, as long as she kept giving me more of them, I supposed I could forgive her. I brought another cookie to my lips.

Leticia, more or less gauging whether I’d calmed down, asked, “Are you sure you want my brother, though? Speaking as his sister, I cannot endorse your choice. He’s a terrible person.”

You know you’re awful when your own sister says so. Ouch. It was true: his personality wasn’t exactly stellar. But to me, that was secondary.

“You grew up wealthy, Leticia, so perhaps you wouldn’t understand,” I said, “but in this world, money talks.”

“Goodness, no! Maria, cover your ears. These are the words of a deranged woman!”

Um, excuse me? “Deranged”? I was *jaded*, all right?

“And shouldn’t *you* be resigning to your fate and getting married already?” I countered.

“Nope. My plan’s still to get away.”

Back when Nadir and I had attempted to apprehend her, the crown prince had been the one to succeed. Ever since, she’d been kept in the royal palace, confined to a room until her wedding. Still, she frequently attempted to escape, causing commotion after commotion.

I decided not to tell Leticia, still hell-bent on running away, that her wedding ceremony would be taking place in only a few days.

***

And thus, the day of Leticia’s wedding ceremony had arrived.

Though she still seemed determined to run away or whatever, in the end, she did return His Highness’s embrace, and so theirs must’ve been a happy marriage indeed.

Ah, how nice it must be to be so loved.

I’d managed to secure a seat next to Nadir at the ceremony. Not because he’d asked me to sit there, of course. I simply shamelessly took the spot next to him.

“What a beautiful wedding,” I said to the bride’s brother as the guests cheered.

“Indeed,” he replied, a serene look upon his features.

He might’ve seemed indifferent, but surely he was happy for his sister. Neither sibling had the habit of being true to their feelings.

“Lord Nadir,” I said.

“How many times have I told you to drop the ‘lord’ part?” he reprimanded me.

“Right. Sorry.”

Nadir *really* didn’t like it when I spoke to him formally. He kept telling me not to. I only did so because we were in public, but that had still bothered him.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Do you ever think about getting married yourself?”

“No.”

Wow. Shot down instantly. He really wasn’t the type to get swept up in the moment, huh?

“But aren’t you at least a little jealous of how happy they look?” I continued. “Do you not want that?”

“I don’t need it at the moment,” he said flatly.

He was so unapproachable. To be fair, a man of his stature probably felt no need to rush, but as a woman, my prime was brief.

Which was why I was in such a hurry myself—an *awful* hurry. Debt repayment loomed on the horizon.

“Um, so...” I began, hesitating a bit. Still, I had to be bold if my family was to survive. I mustered my courage and continued, “Do you, perhaps, know any rich young men who might, let’s say, be willing to settle a large amount of debt—”

“What?” he replied curtly in a sharp, intimidating tone, not looking at me.

“Oh! I’m sorry,” I apologized reflexively. “It’s nothing.”

Was that too brazen?

I thought perhaps he could’ve introduced me to someone he knew.

Maybe that would've been less of a hassle than having to deal with me directly. Apparently he wasn't a fan of the idea.

Which meant Nadir remained the only viable option for me to bet on.

Fortunately, I had the advantage of being friends with his sister, which gave me plenty of opportunities to see him.

Don't worry, mom and dad! I'll be a good daughter, settle our debt, and be a beautiful bride for you!

Looking at Leticia in her wedding dress, I clenched my fists.

***

By a certain point, I thought it'd never happen.

I'd remained relentless in my attempts at approaching Nadir, but whenever I'd visited his home, I'd been turned away at the door. Maybe he was avoiding me. Even at the palace he escaped my grasp.

But the deadline for the repayment remained on the horizon. I couldn't simply keep focusing on him forever.

And so, I gave up on pursuing him alone and decided to pour my energy back into attending balls... Which, in the end, didn't work. I still couldn't find a suitable partner.

Here I was now, on relatively good terms with Leticia, without ever having gotten anywhere with Nadir. And that made me wonder: why had I been invited to this ball?

Granted, it was a valuable opportunity to try and find a match, so of course I'd sent in my RSVP. Today was the day of the ball, hosted by Duke Dorman himself.

A servant approached me at the reception. "Lady Brianna, correct? Please, this way."

I was escorted somewhere else, separate from the other attendees. How odd. Normally at a ball I would've simply been taken directly to the venue. Puzzled though I was, I didn't want to cause a scene, and so I followed as instructed. Upon arriving at a room a little ways from the ballroom, the servant asked me to go inside, then left.

Wait, was I supposed to just walk on in? Why hadn't they opened the door for me?

Displeased, I hesitantly pushed it open to find a man standing inside the

room: the son of the host, next in line for the title of Duke Dorman—Nadir Dorman.

He looked at me, and his expression instantly soured.

“Have you heard of knocking?” he asked. Which, fair point, but he *could’ve* been less rude about it, especially after deliberately having me brought here. Paying no mind to my pursed lips, he continued, “Your chest’s too big.”

“I-I beg your pardon?!” I stammered, unable to contain my astonishment.

“Only someone vulgar would show off such ample cleavage like that,” he said. Without preamble, he turned and called out, “Hey!”

Promptly, a servant answered his summons, presenting me with a shawl.

“Put this over your shoulders, you indecent woman,” he grumbled.

“I-I am *not* indecent!” I protested. Still, it *was* rather chilly, and so I draped the shawl over myself as instructed. The fabric was of very high quality. I ran my hand over it several times, thinking I might never get the chance to touch something like this again.

Satisfied after watching me put on the shawl, Nadir began to walk away, saying, “Now let’s go.”

“What? Go where?” I asked, hurriedly following after him.

“What do you mean, ‘go where?’ There’s a ball going on.”

“I know *that*!”

“We’re going to the venue.”

“What?”

We were going to the ball? Like this? Wait. Wait, did that mean—

“You want me as your partner for tonight?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

What did he mean, “that’s right”?! Nothing was right about this!

“No, thank you!” I snapped. “I’m trying to find myself a husband!”

“Go ahead,” he replied flatly.

“How, exactly, with you by my side?!”

“Then don’t.”

How dared he say that so nonchalantly, when I was over here attending ball after ball as if my life depended on it! Which it did!

I stopped walking to try and refuse, but he took my right hand and began to drag me along.

“The people around me won’t stop pestering me to settle down,” he explained. “I’ll see to it that you’re rewarded, so shut up and follow me.”

“No!” I protested. “Absolutely not! Pretend or not, our difference in status is too great for a proper match! It’s best not to!”

“Unfortunately for you, my parents are believers in love over status. I can deceive them quite easily.”

“No way!”

Despite my continued attempts at refusal, we soon arrived at the entrance to the venue.

“I can hardly believe you’re the same woman who once tried to attack me,” he remarked.

“That was strictly because I thought if someone saw it, they’d think we’d done the deed and I’d have secured a marriage!”

Of course, now I knew better and just wanted to keep out of trouble. Nadir knew this, but the corners of his lips curled up into a smirk anyway.

“Well, lucky you, then,” he said. “Now everyone will think you’re with me.”

“Nooo!”

Despite my shout of refusal, the outcome had already been decided. I was a woman and he was a man, after all.

The doors to the ballroom slowly opened, and the enthusiastic atmosphere filled the air. Conversely, my own enthusiasm crumbled away.

Beside me, a broad grin played upon Nadir’s fine features.

***

I am never, ever going to chase after a man straight into a trap ever again, I resolved quietly to myself as I walked through the doors with Nadir.

The world beyond the double doors was so refined that it made the balls I’d been attending previously look like children playing pretend. It was clear in comparison just how paltry the parties were that I had been able to attend, as the daughter of a debt-ridden baron.

My attention was diverted from my self-deprecation back to reality when Nadir nonchalantly stepped on my foot. *What kind of man steps on a lady’s foot on purpose?!*

I subconsciously glanced at the face of the man escorting me. He bore a serene smile, looking nothing like the blackhearted jerk who'd forcibly made me his partner moments ago.

Indeed, Nadir knew what he was doing. As I sat there stewing in frustration, his hand, which was coiled around my waist, pinched my side. Was he telling me to pull myself together? He had to be, right? Trying my hardest to do away with the tension on my face, I put on my best smile. It must've been a good enough attempt, because his grip relented.

People approached us as we strolled leisurely around the venue. It made sense. He was the host's son, so greetings were in order.

"I thank you for your generous invitation, Lord Nadir," a guest said.

"You look splendid as always," said another.

"Do you remember me?" a third asked.

Nadir handled the constant flow of guests with practiced ease. A high noble through and through—nothing like me. It was all I could do to keep my cheeks from twitching.

Rich bachelors came to greet us, one after another. Ah, what a waste. They would've never approached me like this had I been alone! So many promising single noblemen, all gathered in one grand ball, and I couldn't even strike up a conversation with any of them. I had a smile on my lips and a knife in my heart.

"Incidentally," one of them said, "who might this lady be?"

Oh, crap.

My shoulders tensed and twitched. Nadir gave me a look as if to tell me to introduce myself.

"A pleasure to meet you, my lord," I said with a light curtsy. "I am Brianna, daughter of Baron Lariquel."

My greeting might've perhaps been lacking for a higher-ranked noble, but apparently, social ranks weren't much of a consideration at tonight's ball. Which was impressive—an event of this magnitude, a casual party?

"Oh my," the guest said. "And where might you have found such a lovely lady?"

"An acquaintance of my sister's," Nadir explained.

"Oh! Of Her Highness the Crown Princess!" the guest, a count, exclaimed with admiration in his voice. Clearly his perception of Leticia was quite different from the reality of the young woman I'd seen merrily

climbing trees just yesterday.

“Now then, we should go see my father,” said Nadir, smoothly leading me out of his social circle.

“Your father?” I repeated, the word making me uneasy.

He smirked at me in a way I hadn’t quite seen before. “My parents are the hosts tonight. It stands to reason we would greet them, no?”

True. There was no need to deliberately avoid his parents. Still, I had a bad feeling about it. I tried to wiggle so as to create some distance between myself and Nadir, but he held on tight, negating my efforts.

He slowly pulled me to where his parents were standing, and I felt a growing sense of dread. I did *not* want to meet them.

Naturally, my wishes went unheeded, and soon we stood before a kindly-looking couple who absolutely did not look like the parents of someone like Nadir. The contrast between them was such that I wondered whether he might’ve been an illegitimate child. He glared silently at me when I glanced his way. Had he read my mind?

“Nadir,” said the woman, presumably his mother, in a gentle tone. “It’s been a while.”

“You haven’t changed at all, mother,” Nadir replied with an easy, charming smile. Was he acting nice? Pretending to be a good boy in front of his parents?

Perhaps he’d once more read my thoughts, because he stepped on my foot again. *Stop stomping on a lady’s foot!*

“We haven’t seen you much since you sent us away,” his father said, seemingly on the verge of tears. “Oh, my Lettie...”

Oh. So Nadir *didn’t* pretend to be a good boy to his parents. He was just keeping up appearances due to the other people around them.

“Leticia is a happily married woman now,” he said.

His father sobbed. “I wanted to keep her close longer, shower her with more affection...”

This anguished, weeping man had such a different feel to him than his son. They looked nothing like parent and child. And, judging by the duke’s words, Nadir had even gone as far as removing his own parents from the picture to marry his sister off. Truly a terrible person.

As I watched the two, sympathetic to his teary father’s plight, his mother noticed me, tilting her head.

“And who might this beautiful young lady be?” she asked.

Flattery or no, being called beautiful was always pleasant. I smiled politely at her and curtsied. “I am Brianna, daughter of Baron Lariquel,” I said. “I am accompanying your son to the ball tonight. It is an honor to meet you, my lady.”

I made sure to emphasize I was his partner for *tonight*, but nothing more. His mother seemed to understand the nuance, and offered me a small smile in turn.

“I’m Shelly, Nadir’s mother,” she said before turning to her husband. “Now, now, dear, please do not embarrass us by crying at the ball.”

“Oh, I’m Curtis,” the duke said between sobs, spurred on by his wife. “A pleasure...”

Just as I sighed with relief at having successfully navigated the situation, Nadir smiled brightly, then dropped a bombshell on us all.

“She’s my fiancée,” he declared.

I gaped at him, speechless. Duchess Shelly gave a small, awkward smile, as if saying, *Oh dear.* And Duke Curtis, for some reason, cried even harder.

The awkward silence that hung in the air was interrupted the very next second by the piercing shrieks of the young noble ladies who’d been watching the scene unfold.

***

I was supposed to only be his partner for the ball. Instead, overnight, I became widely known as the fiancée of Nadir, heir to House Dorman.

“What the hell is happening?!” I demanded, forcefully slamming my hands on the table in front of an unfazed Nadir.

We were facing each other in his room, at the Duke’s mansion, where he’d taken me after the party. It was many times larger and more luxurious than the estate where I lived.

“What’s there to be confused about?” Nadir asked. “I told you. Everyone’s been nagging me to settle down.”

“Yes,” I said, “and I was supposed to get them off your back *for the night*, not—”

“I don’t recall ever saying that.”

The words died in my throat at the realization that he had not, in fact, categorically said that. So he'd tricked me!

Fool me once, shame on him, but fool me twice...

"You snake," I muttered.

"Say what you will," he replied flatly.

I wanted to punch him right in his nonchalant snout. Somehow, I managed to hold back.

"It's still pretend, nothing more," he said with a malicious smirk. "I'll treat you well as my temporary fiancée."

I wasn't buying it. "I'm telling you, I can't afford to participate in this little charade of yours!"

Bothering with this rich, single, noble jerk's frivolous games would cost me my own chance at marriage. My family would be ruined.

"It's not such a bad deal for you," he pointed out with a laugh, as if he knew my every thought. "I told you—I'll see to it that you're rewarded."

He *had* promised something along those lines before taking me to the ball, hadn't he?

"I'll settle your family's debt," he declared.

My eyes opened wide in shock. I'd figured he'd known about our debt, but never in a million years had I dreamed he'd want to pay it off.

Overwhelmed by this offer, I shakily asked, "D-Do you realize how much we owe?"

"Sixty million riel, no?" he asked. "It's no meager sum, but it's nothing I can't handle." Nadir shrugged. "How did you manage to end up owing so much?"

"M-My father's far too nice!"

The man was simply too kind, too gullible. Still, he *was* my beloved father. I did not want anyone ridiculing him.

While Nadir had said the amount was "nothing he couldn't handle," an ordinary person wouldn't have been able to pay off even a tenth of it with a lifetime of work. Yet here he was, casually offering to settle such an outrageous sum.

"That...can't be worth it," I said.

"I'll be the judge of that," he replied incisively. "In exchange for the money, you'll be my fiancée. Then you can save your near-bankrupt family. An advantageous result for us both. Do you have any complaints?"

Nope. None at all. In fact, I was beyond grateful. Still, I couldn't fathom why Nadir would go to such an extreme length.

I eyed him carefully, but his mind seemed made up. He was now decidedly ignoring me.

"Thank you," I murmured. Nadir seemed pleased by this. "But...if you take me as your fiancée, you won't be able to marry for some time. That's not a problem to you?"

Nadir frowned in response, as if I'd just asked a silly question. "I'm not marrying just yet," he replied, averting his gaze. "It's not the right time."

So he probably wanted to enjoy his life as a single, rich nobleman a bit longer.

I was at the edge of prime marriageable age myself, so if this pretend-fiancée game went on much longer, marrying at all would become a challenge.

Still, maintaining my family's social status was my top priority.

Forgive me, father, mother. I might not be able to bear my own children. But I can adopt and give you grandchildren that way!

"Oh, also," Nadir continued, "since Leticia took one of our best maidservants, we're a bit short-staffed right now."

What did that have to do with anything?

"Is that so?" I replied.

"She was truly an outstanding maidservant," he said. "She not only attended to Leticia's matters, but also handled the cleaning and other maid duties."

Ah. So *that* was where he was going with that.

"Excuse me," I cut in. "I should head home. My parents must be worried, you see."

As I tried to leave my seat, however, he caught my arm and pulled me back onto the chair. *Please. Please don't say it.*

"You do the household chores at your home, don't you?" he asked.

"How did you—"

"It's only natural I'd look into someone I'll be faking an engagement with."

And here I was, hardly knowing anything about him. The idea of him investigating me behind my back made me bristle, but I waited for him to continue.

“So you’ll be my maid, yes?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said flatly.

He gripped my arm tighter. “You *will*, won’t you?”

“I will *not*!” I snapped, trying with all my might to get up and pull my arm away so I could flee.

His grip didn’t waver. What was he doing, clutching a maiden’s arm so forcefully?!

“I said no!” I repeated. “Pretending to be your fiancée is plenty!”

“That alone isn’t worth it,” he countered. “You said as much yourself.”

So he *did* think it wasn’t worth it for me to simply play at being engaged with him!

“This deal involves you pretending to be my fiancée while also working as a maid at my residence,” he stated. “If you don’t like it, you can simply back out.”

“Ugh...”

Of course I couldn’t do that.

Reluctantly, I sat back down and, in the lowest voice I’d ever used in my entire life, replied, “Fine.”

Satisfied, Nadir nodded. “We have a deal, then.”

One I wasn’t entirely pleased with, mind you.

As I sulked, Nadir produced a garment and threw it at my head.

“Hey! What—” I protested.

“Change into that,” he ordered.

The garment was a dress—a black-and-white maid’s uniform, in fact.

“You really do want me to work as a maid,” I said.

“I was quite clear about that, yes,” he replied.

Hesitantly, I held the maid outfit to my chest. “Where should I get changed?”

“The next room to your right from the door.”

Taking the dress, I left the room, and went into the neighboring room as instructed. In it were a bed, a desk, a single chair, and a small chest. It looked like a servant’s room, but was surprisingly spacious, almost as large as Nadir’s room itself.

“How odd,” I mused.

Normally, servants had much smaller rooms, much farther away from their master. Sleeping right next to their master’s quarters? Unheard of.

Well, I would've been there all night if I'd started questioning every little thing. Leaving my worries aside, I unfolded the outfit.

"Wait a second..." I mumbled, at a complete loss upon seeing the outfit in its full glory.

That bastard!

I left the room and returned to Nadir.

"Hey! What's the meaning of this?!" I demanded.

Upon seeing me there with the outfit in hand, Nadir clicked his tongue. "You didn't put it on," he said.

"Of course I didn't!" I exclaimed, my face turning red in anger.

The outfit in question was a very frilly maid's dress, its skirt so short that even bending slightly would've no doubt exposed my undergarments.

It was *clearly* not meant for work.

"You expect me to work in *this*?!" I asked. "This is blatant harassment!"

"No," he replied. "I might've wanted to see you in it once, that's all."

"So you wanted to laugh at me wearing it! You monster!"

This outfit was far too cutesy. It would've been perfect for a girl with a more innocent look. Me? Why, I'd put it on, and boom, it'd instantly cancel out the whole allure of the dress. In other words, it didn't suit me at all. It wasn't meant for someone with curves.

"Weren't you selling this outfit?" he asked.

"Urk!"

Indeed, the reason I knew so much about the outfit was the fact it was one of the products I sold as part of my business activities to pay off the debt's interest. It sold extremely well, in fact.

"This isn't practical for actual work," I murmured, returning the outfit to him.

"I see," he said. "How unfortunate."

Unfortunate why, exactly?

"In that case, wear this," he said, handing me a different outfit. "There shouldn't be an issue with this one."

This time, I checked the design *before* leaving the room. I checked it front and back, and it looked like a standard maid uniform.

Relieved, I clutched it to my chest and left Nadir's chambers for the next room over. There I took off my dress and slipped into the maid outfit. The buttons closed snugly up to my neckline, and the size seemed perfect,

which was reassuring.

“Sometimes my chest doesn’t fit,” I muttered to myself. Not many would understand this struggle.

I made my way back to Nadir.

“It fits perfectly!” I announced.

“Hmm.” He looked me up and down as if sizing me up in my new outfit. He sounded disappointed when he mumbled, “It does fit just right. I see.”

“What?” I hadn’t quite caught what he’d said.

Nadir shook his head dismissively. “You may use the room you just changed in as your private chambers.”

“I figured. It looked like a hastily prepared servant’s room.”

The furnishings had been modest for such a wide space; their size didn’t match how large the place was. It was as though they’d just placed furniture meant for servants in a room that hadn’t originally been used for that purpose.

“Wait,” I said. “You want me next door to you?”

“I don’t see the problem,” he replied, snickering at me from his chair. “If anything, it’s more convenient that way.”

Something felt off in the pit of my stomach about this man’s smirk, and my intuition hadn’t been wrong about him so far.

“You’ll be living here from today on,” he said.

I tilted my head, unable to comprehend what he’d just said. “Pardon?”

Nadir shook his head in exasperation. “I mean you’ll be a live-in maid from now on. Is that so hard to grasp?”

“What? Live-in maid? You never said anything about that!” I protested.

“I just did,” he replied calmly.

I mean, yes, I’d thought something was off. The bed in that room was far too good to be just for naps, and the chest could hold multiple changes of clothes, which seemed odd for a servant working only the day shift.

“But I have my parents to take care of,” I said.

All our servants had quit, after all.

My mother *had* started handling some of the household chores, but she wasn’t quite familiar with them and, given her age, I couldn’t possibly leave all of them to her and saunter off to live elsewhere.

“It’ll be fine,” Nadir assured me, noticing my unease. “Don’t worry. I’ve sent a servant to your home.”

“You’ve what?” I asked, confused. Sending a servant wouldn’t solve anything. We couldn’t afford one.

“Someone who originally worked here,” he explained. “I’ll pay for their services.”

“Wait, but weren’t you short one person here? What’s the point of reducing the number of servants further?”

I thought this was a reasonable question to ask. He’d brought me to work here because he was short one servant, but this arrangement was just a simple swap, meaning he’d still be short one servant. Besides, overall efficiency would be lower due to both of us being in unfamiliar environments, and that would only increase Nadir’s expenses.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” he said, scoffing. “I’m doing this strictly to mess with you.”

I beg your pardon?

“Excuse me, what?” I asked. “You’re making me work as a maid just to mess with me?”

“Indeed.”

“You only want to mess with me,” I repeated.

“Indeed,” he repeated in turn.

“You went as far as to have a room set up *just* to mess with me.”

“That’s what I’m saying, yes,” he snapped, seeming a bit irritated at my repeated questions.

If that was the reason, that could only mean one thing—

“You’re an awful man!” I said.

“I know.” Unbothered by my insult, he handed me a stack of papers.

“What are these?”

“A list of tasks you’ll be handling from now on, and instructions on how to spend your time in this house,” he explained. “If there’s anything you don’t understand, ask me tomorrow. For today, take a bath, and go to sleep.”

With that, he pushed me out of his chambers.

I’d been prepared to be bossed around starting today, so being told to rest was a bit of a letdown. Still, I went back to my assigned room. There was no point in wearing the maid outfit if I wasn’t going to do any work, so I decided to change out of it, and opened the chest.

“Oh, this looks like loungewear,” I said to myself as I found a simple, comfortable-looking dress. I took off the maid uniform and quickly put the

dress on.

“Now, let’s see what else is in here...”

There were two more similar dresses, as well as two extra maid outfits. And, somehow, a number of undergarments that were, mysteriously, the correct size. Hmm.

The final article of clothing, however, gave me even more pause. I reluctantly plucked it from the chest.

“A-A negligee...”

And it was see-through to boot!

I threw it on the floor. Damn him and his little bonus prank!

“That fiend!” I exclaimed.

I could’ve sworn I heard laughter coming from the neighboring room.

***

“Lord Nadir! Please wake up!”

To get the first task on my list done, I knocked on Nadir’s door, calling out for him. There was no response.

Hmm. It didn’t specify how *to wake him*, I mused. *Am I allowed to just go inside?*

Suddenly barging into his room might put him in a bad mood, however, so I tried knocking once more.

“Lord Nadir! It’s morning!”

Knock, knock, knock.

As I wondered if perhaps he had low blood pressure, I heard a voice coming from inside the room. The sound was muffled by the door, however, so I couldn’t make it out clearly. I put my ear to the door.

“You’ll need to come closer to wake me up.”

What was he, a child?!

“Lord Nadir!” I called out again, storming into his room, prepared to shout right into his ear if I had to. Then I stopped in my tracks. “Uhh...”

The sight of him bathed in sunlight rendered me speechless for a moment. His personality was so awful I’d forgotten how easy on the eyes he was. The sight of his face, glittering under the morning sun, was enough to make anyone swoon.

It felt sensual, somehow. Perhaps it was the lack of his usual formal

attire. His sleepwear made him look oddly vulnerable.

Ah, what long lashes, I thought, unwittingly leaning closer for a moment before hurriedly pulling back. How careless of me!

If I hadn't known better, I could've sworn I'd heard him click his tongue as I pulled away. No, no, of course not. Right? Right.

He's horrible, I frantically tried to remind myself. *Awful, terrible, abhorrent, detestable, heinous, vile! A fiend! Yes. Nothing but.*

"Lord Nadir!" I yelled into his ear. "Please wake up!"

He twitched slightly in response, but didn't open his eyes.

"I know you're awake, my lord!" I protested. "You just spoke a moment ago!"

Nadir clicked his tongue. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes, then tossed the covers aside and sat up.

"Be more charming when waking me up next time," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" What was this man going on about?! "I offer no such services!" I said firmly. "Now please, my lord, do get your ass up!"

"Mind your language," he admonished me.

"Huh?" It occurred to me then that I'd just used a less-than-polite word. "Oh, yes. Please forgive me, my lord. It was a slip of the tongue."

"I'm not talking about that." Apparently it wasn't my impolite choice of vocabulary that had bothered him. "Just talk to me as you usually do."

"What? But I'm acting as a maid, so I should show you proper respect and address you—"

"As you usually do," he insisted.

"Fine!" I relented. "But don't grip me menacingly every time!"

I brushed Nadir's hand off my shoulder. Was that a habit of his whenever he wanted to say something, or what?

"No more of this 'my lord' business," he stressed.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I mean—"

"Got it?"

He reached for my shoulder again, and I quickly replied, "Yes, yes, I got it!"

Seemingly satisfied, Nadir got out of bed. "Hey," he said.

"What?"

"Help me get changed."

He was actually serious about that?

One of the tasks written on the paper he'd given me yesterday was "assist me with changing clothes," but I hadn't taken it very seriously.

"Say, can't your butler do this?" I asked. "I'm more used to cleaning, you see."

"Do it." He wasn't listening.

Reluctantly, I handed Nadir the outfit I'd prepared for him, and he gave me a puzzled look. Why?

"What?"

"Undress me," he commanded.

"Come again?"

"Handing me the clothes isn't helping me get changed. You're undressing me first, then dressing me."

"You're undressing me first, then dressing me." He'd really said that.

I was an unmarried noble lady. Obviously, I'd never helped a man get changed before. And this man was asking *me* to do it for him.

Doing my best to hide my discomposure, I puffed out my chest. "You can't get dressed yourself? Are you a child?"

"Trying to make me angry so you can escape this won't work," he said flatly. "Hurry and do it."

It was like he could read my thoughts.

With no way out of this predicament, I slowly approached Nadir and reached for the buttons on his top.

"Maybe you should do it yourself," I offered.

"No," he countered.

"Of course..."

Ugh. My father was the only man I'd ever seen in any stage of undress.

Oh! Perhaps I didn't have to *see* this!

"What are you doing?" Nadir asked.

"I figured I could help you change with my eyes closed," I explained.

"That's not going to work."

"Of course..."

It was hopeless.

Preparing myself, I opened my eyes. "H-Here I go."

"Mm-hmm."

I swallowed nervously as my fingers, trembling slightly, touched the buttons. This wasn't an issue when I was changing on my own, but now?

My heart felt tight.

“Hurry up,” he snapped.

“I know, I know!” I snapped back.

My quivering fingers made the task difficult, and it took me much longer to unbutton his pajama shirt than it would’ve normally. Besides, this was about much more than simply working the buttons. Even though I was careful when trying to slide the shirt off his arms, our bodies still touched—I accidentally pressed my chest against him. Ugh!

“A perk,” he mumbled.

“What was that?” I asked. I’d been too tense to catch what he’d said.

“Nothing.”

Somehow, I managed to undress him. The tension was such that I was breathing heavily by the end of it.

“Hey,” he snapped. “Why are your eyes closed again?”

“B-Because you’re nude!” I stammered.

“I’m wearing bottoms.”

“That’s beside the point!”

“You can’t exactly help me with my top if your eyes are closed.”

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes. I’d never seen a man around my own age undressed before, so this was the first time I’d been exposed to the upper body of one.

Nadir’s fully undressed torso was moderately toned, and he had a masculine aura about him. His broad shoulders were a stark contrast to mine. He was sensual, despite being a man. Perhaps it was the fact he’d just woken up—his languid demeanor added a touch of seduction to the whole thing.

“What’s the matter?” he asked teasingly, despite no doubt being aware of my flustered state.

“Uh, umm...” With no idea how to conceal the blush on my cheeks, I helped him put on his shirt.

“This is taking a lot longer than usual.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t make me do this, then,” I pleaded earnestly.

“No, I definitely should.”

Denied.

“I’ll do the bottom half myself,” he said.

“Then why didn’t you just do the top too—” I began, before he boldly

began to remove his pants as if my presence was of no consequence. “Eek! Don’t undress in front of me!”

“Why are you staring so intently?”

“I-I’m not!” I protested as he began to walk toward me. “And don’t come over like that!”

“Your reaction’s entertaining. I’ll give you a better look.”

“No! No, thank you!” I said, trying to put distance between us. Unfortunately, the bed stood between me and freedom, and I was cornered. “Eek! G-Go to work, or whatever it is you do!”

“I can afford to be a little late.”

“No you can’t!”

As the two of us argued back and forth, the door to the room swung open. There stood the young butler I’d met once before.

“Young master!” he called out. “How much longer are you going to be in your...room...?” His words trailed off as he stared at us in amazement for a moment. Suddenly, a grin spread across his face.

I gasped, realizing the situation we were in. Pinned to the bed, my cheeks bright red. Nadir on top of me, only in his underwear.

“Th-This isn’t—” I tried to explain.

“Well, well!” the butler interrupted. “It seems I was right about *that*! Such energy, so early in the morning!” At the word “that,” he made a heart with his fingers again.

I shook my head *very* vigorously. “You’ve got it all wrong!”

***

How utterly exhausting.

After I’d seen Nadir off, I slumped into a chair, completely spent.

“Is this how it’ll be every day?” I didn’t even want to imagine it.

“You know,” said the butler who had completely misunderstood my relationship with Nadir, grinning ear to ear, “I thought he was more into the prim and proper types.”

Clearly he still had the wrong idea.

“I keep telling you that’s not what happened!” I protested.

“Oh, it’s fine, it’s fine!” he said, raising a hand as if to stop me. “I understand!”

He did not!

“Ah, a tale of love between a commoner and a nobleman, a bridge between two worlds... How romantic...”

He *really* did not.

“I may not look the part,” I said, “but I’m a baroness.”

“What?!” he exclaimed. “You don’t look like one at all!”

Did he really have to be so blunt about it?

“I thought maybe you were an orphan like me,” he explained. “So sorry!”

“Oh, you’re an orphan?” I asked.

He grinned widely again at my question. “Yes! Yes, I am! The young master took me in when I was five as an apprentice butler!”

“Huh. That doesn’t sound like the kind of thing he’d do.”

Nadir didn’t seem the charitable sort, after all.

“I know, right?! Shocking, you may think!” the butler exclaimed. “But actually, he’d been planning to take a different child in. They weren’t available, so I was picked as the replacement.”

“Oh?”

So he’d had someone else in mind.

“I’m so lucky!” the butler exclaimed. Perhaps he’d had some sort of special skill, and that’s why he’d been chosen as the substitute? Still, looking at him, he seemed pointedly unexceptional.

“But you know,” I said hesitantly, unsure whether being so blunt was a good idea, “considering it’s been over ten years since your adoption, and I’m just saying, you still look quite...plebeian.”

In other words, he didn’t look like a duke’s butler.

“Apparently my personality was already set in stone at age five!” he said. “I tried to adapt, you know, my way of speaking and such, but eventually I was told ‘enough already,’ and they let it go!”

They’d given up on him, essentially. I bit back the urge to say that out loud.

“I’m surprised you haven’t been fired yet.”

“The young master may be the way he is, but he *does* have a compassionate side to him, you know!”

So the young butler said. I certainly had yet to see this side of Nadir.

“Still, even now the young master hasn’t given up on the orphan he’d

originally aimed for," the butler said. "He keeps asking me if I remember anything about that child."

"You'd think with the connections and resources of a duke, he'd be able to find them easily," I pondered.

"See, that's the thing!" the young man said with a chuckle. "The young master was only ten at the time, so he wasn't very thorough. He didn't even know this child's name! And since management at the orphanage was a mess, they had no clue where that particular orphan was taken."

"An orphanage under the duke's management was that poorly run?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh, no, no, this wasn't an orphanage managed by the young master's family or anything," the butler explained. "He just happened upon it one day when he got lost after running away from home."

He'd run away from home? Nadir absolutely did not look the type.

"Ack! Rats," the young man said. "I need to get back to work! I'll see you around!"

After running his mouth to his heart's content, the butler ran off. The boy was a bit like a whirlwind, but it was hard to hate him.

"Oh!" I gasped in realization after he'd left. "I forgot to mention I'm an orphan too..."

***

"What are *those*?" Nadir blurted out.

I'd greeted Nadir when he came home, taken his luggage, and followed him to his chambers. Just like earlier this morning, he'd ordered me to get him changed.

So, of course, I'd put these on.

"They're called 'sunglasses,'" I explained. "They make things look a bit darker, and you won't be able to see my eyes as clearly!"

I praised myself for my wonderful idea. With this, even if I saw him unclothed again, I wouldn't be as embarrassed!

Oh, incidentally, these sunglasses had originally been meant to be sold to the aristocracy, but sales had failed to meet expectations. Nobles were confident, you see, and didn't need anything to hide their faces.

I couldn't afford to have excess stock just sitting around, and so I'd

changed my target audience and modified them to suit commoners instead. Now that sales pitches were directed at those who worked directly under the sun, the product did reasonably well.

“Unacceptable,” Nadir said, without bothering to hide his irritation, and unceremoniously snatched my sunglasses from my face.

“Ack!” I yelped. “What are you doing?!”

“I forbid you from wearing these.”

“Why?! I need them so I can work smoothly!”

“And who says I want your work to be smooth?” he asked, flatly denying my argument. “I just want to see you flustered.”

“Oh, you twisted devil!”

“Say what you will. Now help me change.”

“Urk...”

I gazed longingly upon my sunglasses, now forever out of my reach, never to be returned to my hands. With reluctant resignation, I began to undress Nadir.

It was okay! I’d just done the same thing this morning! I wasn’t about to be embarrassed by seeing a man’s torso!

That was what I wanted to believe, anyway. My red cheeks paid no heed to my internal pep talk. This was not the sort of thing one could get used to in a day or two.

My trembling fingers were no help whatsoever. I looked at Nadir, whose lips were curled into an amused smile. That twisted, twisted jerk!

“H-Here, I’ve unbuttoned it, so move your arm!” I told him.

“Be gentle with me,” he demanded.

“Can you stop being weird about this?!”

He was very obviously making fun of me, clearly enjoying watching me fume. Well, I wasn’t going to waste my time entertaining him! Quickly, I stripped him down.

“There. I’ve undressed you,” I said. “Now put your arm through here.”

“You’re much smoother about it than this morning,” he remarked, seemingly disappointed that I wasn’t as panicked as last time, despite my embarrassment. “Boring.”

“One gets better at work the more they do it, no?!”

“I want to see you lose your mind.”

“You should be careful with your word choice so you don’t give people

the wrong idea."

As I buttoned up his shirt, just like in the morning, the door swung open.

"I heard that!" Nadir's young butler exclaimed, barging in without knocking yet again. "How indecent!"

"See?!" I said. "There's a wrong idea, right there!"

Nadir frowned in displeasure at the interruption. "Knock before you come in, Ben."

"I'm so sorry, Young Master!" the butler said. "I just couldn't possibly miss a love scene like this! Who knows when I'd get the chance again?"

"Ben!" Nadir snapped, visibly irritated.

"I'm sorry!" the butler with a tendency to say entirely too much replied. "I'm so sorry!"

Huh. I don't think Ben ever told me his name. Wait, I never introduced myself properly!

I extended a hand to the young man. "Apologies, I seem to have forgotten to introduce myself," I said. "I'm Brianna, a baroness. I'll be working as Nadir's maid for the time being. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Ah, Brianna! I see!" the butler replied with his wide, youthful grin, shaking my hand. "I'm Ben! I'm seventeen! Nice to meetcha!"

Would that Nadir had some of that innocence.

Our warm handshake was broken apart by a hand chopping sharply from above.

"..."

"....."

"....."

Ben and I, both dumbstruck, looked silently at Nadir who, for some reason, looked silently back at us.

After pondering for a moment, he cleared his throat. "Unmarried women shouldn't be casually holding hands with young men."

That made no sense whatsoever.

"What do you mean, 'holding hands'?" I asked. "This is a handshake..."

"And it's unnecessary," Nadir pointed out. "Don't do it."

"Handshakes are pretty necessary when introducing oneself."

"I said don't do it."

"Okay, fine! I get it!" I didn't, actually.

Still, Nadir seemed satisfied with that. Ben, who had been watching

quietly, joined his hands in a heart shape once more.

"You two really are a thing!"

"As I *keep* saying, we are *not*!"

***

Before I knew it, two weeks had gone by.

Fourteen days working at this estate. I'd gotten used to helping Nadir change, and *still* three days ago he'd scolded me harshly. I'd grown efficient! He had no right to be angry with me!

My hands had not trembled, and I had stayed perfectly calm as I helped him change. Nevertheless, he'd berated me for not being careful enough, for being rude to him. Why? He'd been so displeased he'd even tried to suddenly remove his bottoms. I'd fled, shrieking. The man was incomprehensible.

Also, my every task seemed to revolve around Nadir. Wake him up, help him change, see him off, welcome him home, clean his room, do his laundry. Nadir, Nadir, Nadir. I couldn't help but think there was some sort of malicious intent behind his choice of duties.

To be fair, though, the work environment wasn't that terrible, so I considered myself relatively lucky, I thought as I changed his bed linens.

And then Ben barged right in. How many times did he need to be told to knock?

"Brianna!" he said. "You have work to do!"

"I'm already working, if you haven't noticed." I glared at him. Was he going to add even more to my plate?

Ben shook his head. "No, no! Not as his maid! As his fiancée! Have you forgotten about that?!"

I had!

I'd gotten so used to life as a maid that in my mind, this was all my job entailed, despite the fact that originally the plan had been for me to be his pretend fiancée. This was the first time it'd come up at all.

"There's a party tonight!" Ben said. "Finish up here and return to your room, please!"

"Okay..."

A party as his fiancée... Ugh, I was *not* in the mood. But what choice did

I have?

I took as much time as I could to perfectly straighten his linens before leaving for my own chambers. Yes, it was a pointless bit of resistance, but I deserved a little pointless resistance, did I not?!

When I opened the door to my room, Nadir was right there.

“Why are you here?!” I asked.

“The party,” he replied, as if that explained anything. It didn’t! It explained nothing at all!

I’d expected to find a handmaiden, perhaps, waiting for me. Not Nadir! Didn’t he have work to do?

“Now, to pick out a dress,” he said. “Which color?”

“What’s with all these dresses?”

“I had them made in advance,” he explained casually.

“This many?!”

There had to be ten-odd dresses, each of them high quality. *And* he’d said he had them custom made, not bought at a store.

I considered asking him how he knew my size, but thought better of it. I didn’t want to know.

“Why this many when we’re only pretending to be engaged?” I asked. “What a massive waste of money!”

“It’s not a waste,” he said flatly. “They’ll all be used.”

How many parties was he planning on taking me to?!

“These are only a few,” he continued. “There are more.”

“How many did you order?!”

“The necessary number.”

That was absolutely *not* necessary! Ah, the cost of just one of these dresses would’ve been such a massive help back home...

Would he allow me to bring these back once our pretend engagement was over, I wondered? They *were* made in my size, after all. Perhaps I could negotiate having them act as my severance pay.

“Blue will do for today.” Nadir decided on a dress, then reached for the table full of accessories—which, of course, were all luxurious and dazzling.

“You bought those too?” I asked, incredulous.

“I did. You’ll need them.”

There were too many accessories for me to even count.

I couldn’t claim *these* as severance pay; they looked far too expensive.

He should gift them to his future wife. The dresses were my size, though, and so they likely wouldn't fit her—if they were just going to be discarded, I'd rather take them with me.

"The rich truly do spend their money in incomprehensible ways," I mused.

"I don't typically spend money like this," Nadir countered.

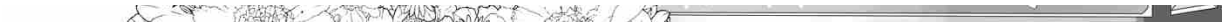
"I wonder..."

Nadir held a few accessories up in front of me, trying to decide which would look best.

"I wanted to give these to you, that's all."

I froze at the unexpected statement.

Could he please *not* say things that would send my maiden heart into a tizzy? I wasn't used to sweet words, so even the smallest things gave me butterflies!



Seeing me motionless and red as a beet, Nadir seemed to realize the effect of his own words, and he returned the necklace he'd been holding to the table.

Awkward. Why did he stop?

He fiddled with the jewelry laid out on the table, furrowing his brow.

"You probably haven't seen many luxurious items like these," he said. "Enjoy them while you can."

"Ah! I knew it!" I exclaimed. "I *knew* you were that kind of man!"

How stupid of me to get butterflies!

Seemingly amused by my indignation, Nadir chose an accessory, and called a handmaiden over.

I hadn't noticed, but apparently she'd been waiting in the corner of the room the whole time. Thank goodness! That meant she'd be the one to help me dress, of course! Not Nadir!

Sighing in relief, I watched as Nadir spoke to the handmaiden. "Bring me several suitable pairs of shoes to match this dress and jewelry," he told her.

"Yes, my lord," she replied, hurriedly walking out of the room.

I wasn't wearing the dress. No makeup. My hair wasn't styled. Shoes still needed to be picked out, and most likely Nadir, who was still in my chambers, would be the one to do it.

It was going to be a long, long day before the party.

***

Just getting ready for the soiree had me exhausted.

"Why does it have to take so long?" I lamented.

"That's my problem, not yours, no?" Nadir retorted.

Well, yes. He was paying for everything, so it was indeed his problem.

"We're not even at the event yet," he admonished me. "Pull yourself together."

"I know, I know!" It wouldn't do for me to not pull myself together if I was attending a party as his pretend fiancée. I psyched myself up, telling him, "I've got this! You're getting your money's worth!"

"How reassuring," he replied with a soft chuckle.

I stared at him in shock.

“Why are you stunned all of a sudden?” he asked.

“I mean, you just... That was a genuine laugh just now.” Before now, I’d only ever seen him smirk, either maliciously or sarcastically. Seeing an *actual* smile on his face had taken me by surprise. He looked like an ordinary, amiable gentleman.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” he snapped, his usual scowl immediately returning to his features.

“I’m just relieved to see you’re human after all.”

“And what did you think I was?”

“The king of all demons.”

“Hey!”

Nadir and I continued to banter on our way down the corridor toward the venue, until finally we reached the doors. We exchanged a glance as a servant approached to let us in, nodding in mutual understanding.

Now the real challenge began.

The high-quality doors opened without so much as a creak, and we walked in, arm in arm. Several guests glanced our way, whispering among themselves. Nothing I wasn’t already expecting, so I paid them no mind.

“Hello, Nadir,” a droopy-eyed man said as he approached us. “It’s been a while.”

“It certainly has, Abel,” Nadir replied with a polite smile. “Brianna, this is an old acquaintance of mine—Abel, the son of Marquis Arande. Abel, this is Brianna, my fiancée.”

At Nadir’s prompting, I curtsied.

“It’s an honor to make your acquaintance, Lord Abel. I am Brianna, daughter of Baron Lariquel.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Lady Brianna,” the marquis’s son said, his eyes drooping even further. “I am Abel, a friend of Nadir’s.”

He seemed like a genuinely nice person. Hard to believe he was friends with Nadir of all people.

“You know,” Abel said. “When I heard you were engaged, I thought it was a joke.”

“I wouldn’t announce something like that as a joke,” Nadir assured him.

“Oh? Then would you tell me how your love story goes?”

Love story? There was no story, let alone one involving love. I wished he’d asked how we’d met, or something.

Nadir signaled to me with his eyes, so I began talking. “Lord Nadir and I met in our youth, and eventually lost touch. We’ve recently reconnected, you see. He was my first love.”

It was all a bald-faced lie, of course.

Nadir had instructed me on what to say, anticipating that people would ask such questions. The full made-up story was more detailed than that, but there was no need to go into specifics at present.

Honestly, though, why was his being my first love part of this ruse? Please stop.

“Ah, I see,” Abel said, playfully elbowing Nadir’s side. “Puppy love.”

“Shush,” Nadir snapped, grimacing.

At first I’d thought they were only superficial acquaintances, but clearly their relationship ran deeper than that.

Who knew *Nadir* had friends? He must’ve noticed the somewhat-impressed look I was giving him, because his brows crinkled.

“Hey, Nadir,” Abel began, “go get us something to drink. I want to talk to Lady Brianna.”

Nadir glanced at me, and I gave him a reassuring nod.

“I’ll be right back, then,” he said before leaving.

Abel turned to look at me with those droopy eyes of his, and gave me a sly little grin.

“So, why don’t you tell me how you seduced your way into this betrothal, hmm?”

Oh. Turned out he was actually terrible.

***

“I beg your pardon? *Seduced*?”

I did my best to seem as meek and distraught as I could. Which, considering the fact I looked anything but meek, was probably ineffective. But still, it beat doing nothing. Maybe seeing that look on my face would make him hesitate to press his attack. Perhaps there was still a chance he was a gentleman.

“He wouldn’t have spared you a glance otherwise,” Abel explained.

Rude bastard.

This not-at-all-gentlemanly jerk wanted to figure me out in Nadir’s

absence, it seemed. *Maybe I'll tell Nadir when he comes back about how great it is that he has a friend who's so concerned for his well-being,* I mused. Granted, maybe the man was simply curious.

"I don't see any positives about you at the moment," he continued. "I wonder what he sees in you?"

What was he expecting me to do, answer that question? Protest and try to make him see my best qualities? Sadly for him, I wasn't a narcissist. Perhaps I should've simply told him straight out that I didn't care whether or not he liked me? Like, "Oh no, I'm so sorry I'm not up to your standards," or something? Hmph!

"That would be a question better suited for Lord Nadir," I replied.

"So, how did you do it?" he insisted. "Blackmail? Or maybe, you know, those?"

At the word "those," he pointed at me. Specifically, at my chest. He was openly harassing me at a party, in plain view of everyone!

I told myself over and over to not let it get to me.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure what you mean," I said.

"Don't play dumb with me," Abel retorted. "You've been trying to cozy up to rich men this whole time, no?"

Oh no. Apparently he knew more about me than I'd thought. Indeed, I had been trying to cozy up to rich men. My family had been on the verge of financial ruin, after all.

"I'm sure that's what it seemed like," I offered tentatively.

"No, that's definitely what it was."

Damn. What a nuisance this man was turning out to be.

I looked around for Nadir. A number of nobles were surrounding him a little ways away, likely also grilling him about his relationship with me. I couldn't count on him for help.

Now what?

"First of all, there's the discrepancy in your social statuses," Abel pointed out.

"Lord Nadir's parents believe in marriage for love," I told him.

"*True* love," he emphasized.

Pest!

My smile never left my face, even as I broke into a cold sweat. I had no choice but to buy time until Nadir returned.

“What an education your parents must’ve given you,” Abel said sarcastically. “I would never have taught *my* daughter to cozy up to men for money.”

Oh, that is it*!*

Seeing all emotion vanish from my face, Abel’s smile faltered, and he mumbled a quiet, “Huh?”

I grabbed him by the collar, and he was too stunned to react.

“Say whatever you want about me,” I hissed. “Call me a prostitute, say my growth spurt all went to my chest, whatever! I’m used to it!”

“Well, I wouldn’t quite go that far—”

“But you listen here!” I cut him off. “I won’t let you speak ill of my parents, who raised me with love!”

Abel took a sharp breath.

“They might not be my birth parents, but they took me in and raised me with everything they had!” I continued. “They told me I was free to marry whomever I wanted! And so, when they went into debt, why, of course I wanted to help them! What daughter wouldn’t?! Yes, I batted my eyelashes at rich men! How else was I to settle the debt?!”

I’d thought I’d been doing just fine, but apparently, I had a *lot* of pent-up frustration. As I recalled how other nobles had treated me, I’d inadvertently raised my voice.

“And one more thing!” I exclaimed, shaking Abel vigorously as I looked into his shocked eyes. “This is important!”

I released his collar, and he dropped to the floor.

“I’m still a virgin!” I yelled, my voice echoing throughout the now eerily quiet venue.

Oh no.

***

“It’s over. It’s all over.”

A day had passed since the party. I had nothing to do, and lay sprawled on my bed at the Dorman estate. Ben had anxiously told me to take today off, likely on Nadir’s orders.

“He’s definitely going to end our pretend engagement...”

What of my family’s debt? Had he already paid it off? And if so, would

Nadir pressure me to pay *him* back instead?

“What a stupid, stupid thing to do,” I lamented.

I’d never lost my cool like that before, no matter what kind of awful treatment I’d gotten. Being treated with kindness at the Dorman residence had made me soft. I could hardly believe I’d made such an outrageous blunder.

Was Nadir angry? He had to be, right? He hadn’t said a word on the way home. And I’d hit the jackpot of a lifetime too! That debt had been as good as gone!

I sniffled miserably. What would I tell my parents? Would they be mad at me? They’d be worried, no doubt. And then they’d cry over the hardships they’d put me through. Ah, for shame. I didn’t want to make them cry!

There was a steady knock on the door. I blew my nose, then said, “Come in.”

“How are you, Brianna?” Nadir asked.

Oh. How was I, he asked. How was I, indeed.

Pondering how to answer his question, I looked up at Nadir with misty eyes. He averted his gaze. What, did I look pathetic? I knew I had to look terrible.

Pulling myself together, I spoke. “About the money...”

“Hmm?” He must not have expected that, because he stared blankly at me. It was cute to see him caught so off guard, I thought, but now wasn’t the time for such thoughts!

I shook my head. “Do you think you could cover my family’s debt? I could pay you back in installments...”

“What?”

Oh. Was that too forward of me? I couldn’t afford to back down now, though.

“I’ll pay you back, I swear!” I said. “Please!” It would be the end of my family otherwise!

I pushed myself off the bed, and bowed my head to Nadir. The sound of him sighing came from above.

“Listen...”

I twitched slightly.

“Our ‘engagement’ is unchanged,” he said.

“Huh?” At his words, I lifted my head. He gave it a sympathetic pat.

“That wasn’t a big deal.”

No, no, it was a pretty enormous deal!

I gave Nadir a puzzled look as he stroked my hair.

“In fact, you did very well.”

I did what now? Even more puzzled, I tilted my head.

“I wasn’t expecting things to move this quickly,” he said with a small smile, still petting me.

What? This wasn’t the reaction I’d been expecting at all.

I stood there, perplexed at how high Nadir’s spirits seemed to be.

“Young Master,” Ben said, not bothering to knock as per usual. “Lord Abel is here.”

“Let him in,” Nadir replied, nodding.

Wait, wait. Who did he say is here? There was a knock on the door, and Nadir went to answer. *Wait, no. No way. Why’s he here now?!*

The door opened, mercilessly ignoring my feelings. And, of course, standing right there was Abel, the man whose collar I’d grabbed yesterday.

All color immediately drained from my face. Nadir, however, was having a blast.

Abel’s droopy gaze turned to me. And then it immediately dropped out of my line of sight.

“I’m so, so sorry!!!” he groveled, bowing low on the ground.

What magnificent prostration!

***

Honestly, what *was* going on?

I’d come to the parlor at Nadir’s urging. Of course, both he and Abel were there. And Abel kept on groveling, begging for forgiveness.

What was I supposed to do?

“Um,” I began, “please, take a seat. On a chair.” I wasn’t the host, so it wasn’t my place to say that, but I couldn’t help myself.

At my request, Abel immediately lifted his head.

“You speak so gently to me, despite the awful things I said to you yesterday,” Abel whimpered. “Oh, Lady Brianna...”

Was it just me, or was there the faintest hint of fascination in his gaze? Hopefully he wasn’t getting the wrong idea.

“Hey,” Nadir snapped, grabbing Abel by the collar and forcing him to sit down. “It’s rude to stare.”

Abel shifted in his chair, turned to me once more, and lowered his head. “I truly am sorry for the unspeakably rude things I said.”

“Oh, um, er,” I stammered, “I went too far too, so I’m sorry as well.” I couldn’t quite wrap my head around what was happening, but I figured I should apologize too.

Abel’s eyes grew misty. “I’d heard of Nadir’s engagement and wondered who his chosen might be,” he explained. “When I realized that was you, well, I wanted to unmask you. I’d heard stories about you before.”

Stories? What stories? Wait, no, I could imagine what stories, and they couldn’t be anything good. It was best not to ask.

“You were watching out for your friend’s best interests, I imagine,” I said. Abel’s words suggested he really did see Nadir as a friend. I would’ve never imagined Nadir of all people could have a friend like this.

Abel let out a low, whiny sound. “I’m sorry... I thought my friend was being tricked by a gold-digging hussy...”

“You really didn’t need to say it in so many words,” I replied. So that was how people saw me. A gold-digging hussy. I knew it. Expected it, even!

“So having heard of your ill repute and knowing that my friend had never shown any interest in women before,” Abel continued, “when I saw you two together, I thought I had to open his eyes!”

Did he *have* to keep disparaging me as he apologized? Honestly! Was I supposed to be happy or sad?

Abel kept his head low as he continued his desperate attempt at an explanation. “I didn’t know about your circumstances, Lady Brianna. To think you’ve been struggling so much...” He sobbed. “So much...”

And now he was crying.

In stark contrast to my panic and inability to comprehend what was happening, Nadir remained perfectly composed.

Abel sobbed once more. “At least allow me to invite you to dinner as an apology—”

“Ben,” Nadir said, “I believe it’s time for our guest to go.”

“What?” Abel replied. “Don’t be so heartless, Nadir!”

At Nadir’s request, Ben, the young butler, came over and began to drag

Abel out of the house.

“I’ll invite you to dinner yet!” Abel yelled, his voice fading as he was hauled farther away. “Mark my wooords!”

That had been loud and clear. He *really* wanted to invite me to dinner. Well, if the food was any good, I might just go...

“That’s a no on the dinner,” Nadir said flatly.

Well, if my employer forbade it, then no dinner for me.

“So, do you get it?” he said.

“Get what?” I asked.

“You saw Abel just now. Do you think people think ill of you?”

“No, actually. If anything, I think I’m...held in high regard?” That had to be the case, right? Why would the man have apologized so fervently otherwise?

“Our engagement gave rise to concerning gossip, no doubt,” Nadir said, “but things seem to have taken a positive turn.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Indeed, having seen Abel’s reaction, I could tell that things were going well. What I couldn’t tell was why.

“People are more driven by emotion than you’d think,” Nadir mused.

“Pardon?”

“To nobles, who live in the lap of luxury, the story of a young girl rising from unfortunate circumstances is deeply moving.”

“Pardon?”

Nadir grinned. “Rumor had it you were trying to marry rich, yes, but no one knew *why*. They only saw you as a money-hungry seductress. Now, however, the reason behind that rumor has come to light.”

My eyes widened at the word “reason.” Was he saying—

“Brianna, the money-hungry seductress, is actually hard at work for her parents’ sake, trying to repay their debt. She’s a caring daughter, who’s been judged only by her looks. A commendable young lady, who has kept her chastity in spite of everything.”

“Eek! Nooo!”

Now everyone was talking about how I was still a virgin! Well, I mean, I *was*, but that wasn’t the point! That wasn’t the kind of thing one wanted people talking about!

“Your reputation has soared,” Nadir said. “Good for you.”

“That’s hardly comforting!” It was *embarrassing*!

“And thanks to that,” he continued, “I’m now seen as the hero who rescued a damsel in distress from her cruel fate.”

“Wow,” I mumbled. “You’re tricking them all...”

“And to top it all off, the story goes that we’ve known each other since childhood and have been in pure, innocent love since.”

The words “pure, innocent love” couldn’t have been further from the truth. For them to even be associated with this man was a travesty!

“People are bound to treat you kindly from now on,” Nadir said.

I sniffled. “I don’t want to ever leave the house again.”

“You’ll stay in debt forever, then.”

This fiend!

“Fine!” I snapped. “I’ll go! You want me to go somewhere, I’ll do it!”

“Good,” he said. “Then let us depart.”

Wait. Right now?

“Wait,” I replied. “I just cried! I must look like a total mess!”

“Oh yes,” Nadir agreed. “You look absolutely awful.”

“Can I deck you in the face?” I asked, raising my fist.

“If you deck me in the face and leave a bruise, people will start saying you’re a violent ogress instead.”

I lowered my fist. I couldn’t risk my precious uptick in reputation over simple embarrassment!

“Relax,” Nadir assured me. “We’re not going to a party this time.”

“Then where?” I asked, blinking and rubbing my still-teary eyes.

Nadir gave me an amused smile. “You’re accompanying me on an inspection.”

***

Despite my suggestion that it would’ve been best not to make a public appearance with a face that very obviously betrayed the fact I’d been crying, Nadir had told me the decision had already been made. Not only that, he’d said I’d cried of my own will, so that was my problem and not his. Listen, anyone would’ve cried if they’d thought their life was over, okay?!

Either way, here I was now, in a carriage with Nadir heading toward this

inspection site. Oh, and Ben was riding with us too.

What kind of cruel world was this, where looking unsightly from bawling one's eyes out wasn't enough of a reason to avoid going somewhere?

"Do I really need to come?" I asked. "It isn't as though I know what to do there. Can't I go home?"

"I want to make it known I'm engaged," Nadir replied. "You can stand there and do nothing. It is a noblewoman's duty to be at her husband's side and smile."

I wasn't very good at that kind of thing, though. *In fact, I'd much rather be given something to do than sit still,* I thought as I gazed out the window.

The carriage came to a stop.

"Let's get off," Nadir said, extending a hand to me.

So he can *be a gentleman when he wants to,* I thought as I quietly took it.

It dawned on me that we were somewhere I was very familiar with. "Huh? This place is..."

"An orphanage, yes. I figured a place like this would be easier on you, since you're not used to these outings yet."

Ah, that made sense. Indeed, to a beginner, a place like this would be a better choice than, say, a business.

As I looked at the orphanage, feeling nostalgic, Nadir quickly made his way inside. Rude! He should've been escorting me all the way!

Quickly, I followed after him.

"We've been waiting, my lord," said a voice I hadn't heard in a long time.

"It's been a while, Matron," Nadir replied. "I'm here for today's inspection."

"Ah, yes, one was indeed scheduled." The woman he'd referred to as "Matron" turned her gaze to me. "And who might this be?"

I took a step forward to stand next to Nadir. "I am Brianna, Lord Nadir's fiancée," I said nervously, wondering if she'd recognize me. The matron stared at me intently for a moment before her eyes lit up.

"Well, well, if it isn't little Anna!"

Ah, so she did remember!

She smiled radiantly at me, gripped my hand, and looked at one specific

spot of my body. “You’ve grown a...surprising amount!”

Yes, yes. I too was surprised by the sheer amount of growth my chest had experienced.

Her demeanor melted my worries away, and I took a deep breath, smiling warmly at the woman who had raised me until age seven. “It’s been a long time, Matron—I mean, Mama.”

It had been twelve years since I’d last stepped foot in this place.

***

I toured the orphanage with Nadir as he meticulously checked for inadequacies and carefully went over management practices.

All the children from my time here had either been adopted or grown older and left. The absence of those familiar faces made me feel a pang of sadness, but that feeling dissipated quickly.

“I wanna play horsey!”

“No, let’s play house!”

“Racing’s more fun!”

“Play chess with me!”

“Why are your eyes all red and swollen? You look so bad!”

“Who said that?!” I demanded angrily, causing the children to squeal and scatter.

Kids truly were something. They pulled and jostled me from every direction. It was utterly exhausting. Mama had to deal with this every day? She was getting on in years—where did she find the energy?

“Thank you so much for playing with them,” she said.

“Mama...” I mumbled, completely worn out.

Nadir was off practicing a few swings with the boys.

“Ah,” Mama said, not looking up from her knitting, “I can’t believe how ladylike you’ve become. You were such a tomboy, Anna.”

I couldn’t help but laugh wryly at the memory of my past self. “I know what you mean...”

As a child, I’d been very boyish. I’d loved to climb trees and catch bugs, and I’d preferred running around to playing with dolls in my room. I’d been a fine, healthy child, with a nice tan. When the baron’s family adopted me, everyone was worried that I’d be sent back quickly for being too

rambunctious.

A child suddenly ran at me from behind, interrupting my nostalgia session. “Hey! Play with me!”

“Ehhh...” I’d been playing nonstop since getting here, so I pushed the child away. “Nope! Break time!”

Ah, my old home. How familiar to me it was.

I ran the hell out of there.

***

“Children have no restraint whatsoever...”

Playing with the children had made me acutely aware of how little stamina I actually had. They were relentless!

With a sigh, I sat down in the courtyard I used to love as a child.

Thinking back, this was also where I’d first experienced love.

“Here you are,” came a voice from above. I turned my gaze up, and there stood Nadir.

He took a seat next to me, and I asked, “Are you done playing with the kids?”

“I’m tired,” he explained. “I’m taking a break.”

Yep. Exhausting, right? I was relieved to know it wasn’t just me.

I watched as the grass swayed in the wind, thinking back on how often I used to play tag here.

“Do you remember your time here?” Nadir asked suddenly.

The question took me by surprise, and my head snapped toward him. “You knew?”

“Yes.”

Wow. Just how thorough had he been? It was a bit unsettling to know just how much he knew about me, but it wasn’t as though I could do anything about it.

“Well, I suppose I do remember some of it,” I mused. I couldn’t remember all the children I’d played with back then; only the ones that had left an impression on me. “Oh, but I remember the boy I had my first crush on!”

“Your first crush?” he echoed, giving me an intrigued look. “I didn’t take you for the sort who’d be prone to such delicate matters of the heart.”

“I’m seriously going to slap you if you don’t stop your nonsense,” I snapped, swiftly raising my hand. Nadir shook his head as if to indicate he’d been joking. I lowered my hand again.

“So, what was this first crush of yours like?” he asked.

Well, I’ll be. I hadn’t expected him to be so interested. *What was my crush like...?*

I was lost in thought for a bit as I thought back on my childhood. A girl’s first love is very special to her, after all.

“So you want to know, do you?” I said with a chuckle.

“That laugh was creepy,” he replied.

“I’m a *maiden*, you know. You should be more polite to me.” Not that his rudeness was anything new.

I decided to ignore it, and began to draw upon my memories.

“It was a bright and sunny day...”

***

There was a boy I’d never seen before, standing in my beloved courtyard.

“Hey,” I called out.

With a jolt, the boy turned to face me. He seemed to be around my age, and based on what he was wearing, it was obvious he wasn’t from the orphanage.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Where did you come from?”

“It’s none of your business,” he replied.

“I live here, so it’s totally my business,” I retorted.

The boy fell silent. He just sat down and glared at the ground.

“You’re so gloomy,” I told him. I mean, he *was* just sitting there fuming at the grass!

“What?” he snapped, frowning huffily.

“Something’s bothering you, right?”

“Why do you think that?”

“You’re a little rich kid in fancy clothes, but you walked into this run-down orphanage. If you were just lost, you’d have asked someone for help and left, right?”

Silence again. As I wondered what to do, other kids began to approach.

“Hey, Anna, who’s that?” one asked.

“Hmm,” I mused. “He’s my friend.”

“What?!” the boy exclaimed. Maybe he was upset I’d called him a friend?

I approached him and whispered, “If I don’t tell them you’re my friend, you’ll get kicked out of here real quick.”

Once again he stopped talking, but I took it as acknowledgment this time. I clasped the boy’s hand in mine and pulled him to his feet.

“H-Hey!” he protested.

“Look, I dunno what you’re all hung up about,” I said, “but sitting around like a lump won’t help! You should exercise, so you don’t have time to think about stuff! Which is to say...you’re ‘it’!”

“Huh?!”

“Everyone run!”

I told the boy to count to ten, and scattered with the other children. Behind me, I could hear him go, “What?!” and “Hey!” but I just ignored him. Eventually, I heard him start counting.

Apparently, he knew about tag, but had never played it. He joined us awkwardly at first, but after some guidance, he soon fit right in. The gloomy clouds lifted from his face, replaced by a smile.

“That was fun!”

It was already evening, and the boy had to return home. “U-Um,” he began, his gaze downcast.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Thanks for today. I feel better.” Apparently, he didn’t think I’d stuck my nose where it didn’t belong.

I beamed at him. “You’re welcome!”

“Um,” he mumbled, his cheeks growing red as he looked at me.

“Hmm?”

“Do you...have someone you like...?”

“Someone I like?” I echoed, taking a moment to think before saying the first thing that came to mind. “Ooh! A prince!”

“A prince?”

“Yeah! Like, from a story!” I said, grinning. “They’re so cool! They’re rich and live in huge castles, and they’re handsome! So if I was gonna get married, I’d want it to be to a prince!”

The blush vanished from the boy’s face, and his expression turned sour.

“There’s no way you can marry a prince,” he said.

“I totally can!” I protested, puffing up my cheeks. “One’s totally gonna come for me!”

“No way,” he interjected flatly. “A prince would never choose a commoner.”

“They marry village girls in the stories!”

“It cannot happen!”

“Yes it can!”

“It can’t!”

“It can!”

We went on arguing for a while until we were both out of breath, glaring at one another.

He broke eye contact first, and said, “I’ll come for you.”

“What?”

“I’m not a prince, but I’ll be kind of like one,” he said. “Wait for me.”

With that, he ran away, red as a tomato. And once my brain finished processing what he’d just said, my own face burned bright red.

Brianna. Age seven. Proposed to for the very first time.

***

“And that was my first crush.”

Ah, the bittersweet memories.

I hadn’t been proposed to since. Not genuinely, anyway. All I’d gotten were offers to be a second wife, or a mistress. Apparently my popularity had peaked when I was seven. A tragedy, I tell you.

Nadir had listened to my story quietly, without interrupting. Finally, he spoke. “What would you do if you were to meet that boy again?”

“If I were to meet him...”

Hm. I hadn’t actually considered this. What *would* I do?

“I’d probably ask if he remembers me,” I mused.

“And then?”

“Huh? That’s all.”

Nadir seemed taken aback by my answer. Shock wasn’t something I saw on his features very often. “You wouldn’t want to marry him?”

“Huh? Oh, no, no! All we did was play one time as children. I’m sure it’s a fond memory for both of us, but based on how well-dressed he was, he had to be from a well-off family. He’d be out of my league. And he’s probably already married, or at least engaged, by now.”

Unfortunately for me, I’d grown older. I understood the difference between dreams and reality now. Princes on white horses only existed in storybooks.

“You...” Nadir began. He seemed to want to say more, but after opening and closing his mouth a few times, he settled on letting out a sigh. “Right. That’s very like you.”

“Why am I under the impression I’m being insulted?” I said.

How had the conversation taken this turn? I’d just been reminiscing!

Looking disappointed, Nadir stood. He brushed the grass off his clothes and walked off on his own. Uh, why? Had I done anything wrong? I didn’t *think* I had...

As I tried to decide whether to follow him or leave him be, I was caught off guard by a sudden impact from behind.

“Whoa!” Ben yelped. “I’m sorry, Brianna! Are you okay?”

He’d been playing with the children and hadn’t noticed me, apparently.

“Ow! That hurt!” I protested.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” he said. “I didn’t mean to, okay?! People can’t just stop all of a sudden!”

“That goes for carriages, not people!”

Ben held out a hand to help me to my feet. Despite the strength of the impact, I wasn’t badly injured. At most, I’d get a bruise on my back.

“Be more careful,” I muttered.

“I really am sorry. I got carried away,” he said, shrinking his shoulders dejectedly. “I used to live at this orphanage, so being here is very nostalgic.”

What?

“You used to live...here?” I asked.

Ben was seventeen years old. Which meant twelve years ago, he’d have been five. Had I known a five-year-old named Ben?

I gasped. “Snot-nosed Ben!”

Before I knew it, the words had slipped out of my mouth. Ben stared at me blankly at first, then let out a surprised yelp.

“A-Anna!”

***

Turns out my coworker and I were from the same orphanage.

“Goodness me, Anna!” exclaimed Ben, who sat next to me. “Wow, no way! I would’ve never guessed! Never ever! Not ever!”

“Would you be so kind as to explain what the hell that’s supposed to mean?” I asked.

“I mean, you were so unattractive! And you were hungry all the time—” Ben stopped talking when I pinched his side and began to apologize. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

His tendency to stick his foot in his mouth hadn’t changed one bit since childhood.

“Well, I never thought I’d see you without a runny nose,” I countered.

“You really thought I’d still have a runny nose as an adult?” he asked. “What did you think I’d look like, Anna?”

“Still that same kid with a perpetually snotty nose.”

“That same kid with a perpetually snotty nose, huh?” Ben lamented. His nose was, in fact, no longer snotty. I never thought Ben would’ve turned out to be the same kid I’d once known, who’d always had to carry tissues to blow his nose with.

“What about you, Ben?” I asked. “What did you think I’d grow up to be?”

“I thought you’d mess up a bunch, get kicked out of your adopted home, and end up as a self-made, decent dude.”

“Where do I even begin with that?”

What the hell did he even think of me? There was so much to unpack here.

“First of all, I’m not a ‘dude,’ so why in blazes would you think I’d become a ‘decent dude’?”

“You were the handsomest kid out of all of us,” Ben explained. “Like, to the point you’d have gotten by easier if you pretended to be a guy.”

“Well, that’s true,” I mused. “Back when I lived here, I used to wonder if they’d gotten my gender wrong.”

“Uh, Anna, you’re not supposed to agree with me there, I don’t think.”

“I only really felt like a girl when I realized I couldn’t pee standing up.”

That had been a shock to me, actually. Along with the realization that I wouldn’t be developing certain male attributes. After all, I was better at fighting than the other boys; athletic, smart, a leader among the kids! I was the perfect boy, I thought.

I’d never been able to tell anyone else that it was my inability to pee while standing that had made me realize I was not, in fact, a boy.

“When I was getting adopted, they had to check several times to make sure I was actually a girl,” I said.

“You had short hair and always wore pants,” Ben added.

“I liked them better! They were more comfortable.” And I was always a function-over-form type of girl.

“And also,” Ben said a little sheepishly. “Uh, and also... I wasn’t expecting all that...*boing*.”

“I wasn’t either.” I sighed, looking down at my chest. I really hadn’t thought it’d grow this much. After my growth spurt, I thought they got in the way whenever I moved. Now choosing outfits was such a hassle! I spent *so* much money on clothes. “It’s way better to be average, especially when it comes to expenses.”

“Still talking about money, I see.”

“Of course I am! People with money get things done in this world, Ben.”

“No dreams in your heart, huh.”

Dreams did not put food on the table!

The orphanage was under Nadir’s supervision now, and seemed to be in much better shape, but back when I’d lived here, things had been a lot worse. Getting a full meal at all had been a challenge. Children become realists quickly when raised in an environment like that—I was the prime example.

“Well, the letters you taught me came in handy, at least,” Ben mused.

“See?” I said. “You should be grateful! Perhaps even drop to your knees and worship me.”

“Your ugly side really comes out at times like this,” he said with a long, exasperated sigh. “Man, if you’d been found, he might really have kicked me out.”

“What?”

“Remember what I told you before, that there was another kid he’d

wanted instead?”

Oh, right. He’d told me this shortly after I became a maid. I nodded.

“Wait, Anna...”

“Huh...”

Wait. Was it *me* Nadir had wanted to take in twelve years ago? Did that mean...

“Does that mean Nadir thought I was outstanding?!” I exclaimed.

“Well, it’s probably because he ended up with me instead. And he treats me like I’m a failure, so...”

“I mean, you *are* very bad at your job.”

“You’re so mean...” Ben whined, beginning to tear up.

But I couldn’t afford to be distracted by this! There was something much more important at play here! Namely, the fact Nadir had wanted to adopt *me*!

“I can’t stay here like this!” I exclaimed. “I’ll see you later, Ben!”

“Hey! Anna!”

Ignoring Ben’s cries for me to wait, I took off running.

***

“Nadir!”

I ran to where Nadir was, and found him surrounded by children. And my *goodness* was there a stark difference between this and his usual behavior. He was even letting one of them sit on his head.

“What?” he asked, still looking a bit displeased. But it was fine, he’d come around soon. He always did.

Chuckling, I pulled the child off Nadir’s head. “You should’ve told me sooner.”

“Told you what?” he asked, looking at me as if expecting something.

“That I was the child you were after!” I said, pointing proudly at myself.

He promptly ignored me, and went back to playing with the child.

“H-Hey!” I protested. “Hey, come on! I was a better child than Ben, right?!”

“That’s not very nice, Anna!” Ben whined, panting heavily as he caught up to me.

Resigned, Nadir moved the child from his lap. “And?” he asked.

“Well, you should give me his job!”

Exasperated, Nadir put the child back onto his lap.

Ben was the one to protest. “That’s not fair, Anna!”

“Well, you originally wanted to hire *me*, right? Why not just get Ben to resign? I can take over his duties. You’d save on his salary, and I’d be in your debt! There are no downsides!”

“You should pay off your *current* debts before you take on any new ones,” Nadir admonished me.

“Uh, yes, that... Yes. I should do that first.” I did indeed already owe him quite a great deal. “So, Ben should just resign! That way I can repay you faster.”

“What’s with you and wanting me to ‘just resign’?!” Ben snapped. “I’m not gonna quit! Absolutely not! I’m staying!” He took the child from Nadir’s lap, and laid his own head there, nuzzling Nadir’s stomach. “Young Master! You’re not getting rid of me, right?! I wouldn’t be able to survive anywhere else now! I’m bad at my job! And stupid! You wouldn’t throw me away, right?! Right?!”

“The notion is very tempting right now, actually,” Nadir said.

“Why?!”

Because you’re rubbing your head on his stomach, I’d wager.

“We’ve known each other since I was five! You adopted me, so you need to take responsibility forever!” he protested, continuing to nuzzle Nadir.

“Well,” the nobleman said, sighing deeply, “I don’t plan on getting rid of you for now.”

At those words, Ben quickly lifted his face, his eyes lighting up as he looked at Nadir.

“I *did* take you in,” Nadir agreed. “I plan on taking responsibility. And I don’t have to be nice to you, which is a plus.”

“Oh, Young Master!” the young butler exclaimed, clasping his hands in front of his chest, seeming deeply moved. Why? Nadir had literally just said he didn’t have to be nice to this guy! Did Ben just...not mind?

“Huh,” I mumbled. “I figured it’d be a good way for both of us to save money.”

“I did raise him up to this point,” Nadir said.

Ben was still on Nadir’s lap. As I watched this, a thought occurred to

me. Yes, Ben was less of a butler, and more of a—

“He’s like your pet!”

I pretended not to hear Ben complain about the way he was treated.

***

“I came to invite you to dinner.”

I hadn’t thought he actually would.

Abel showed up with a bouquet of flowers, claiming it was to make amends for the other day. The fact he’d brought a gift with him painted him as quite the gentleman.

And of course, since he’d invited me to dinner, my employer was in an outrageously foul mood. He must’ve really meant it when he’d forbidden me from going to dinner with his friend.

“No dinners,” Nadir immediately snapped, glaring at Abel.

“Whaaat? You’re so selfish,” his friend protested.

I agreed! What a selfish thing to do, interfering with an employee’s dinner plans!

“How about lunch, then? It wouldn’t be as fancy as an evening outing, but—”

“No!” Nadir interjected sharply before Abel could insist any further.

His friend’s gaze went over Nadir and me. “Do you two usually eat together?” he asked.

“Um, yes, in the mornings and evenings,” I explained. Nadir was gone for work during the day, so I ate lunch with the rest of the staff.

“And you’ll be eating together today too?”

“Yes, in a few moments.” At my words, Nadir suddenly glowered at me as if to admonish me for having said too much. Well, I’d already said it. I couldn’t exactly take it back.

Beaming, Abel tried to plead with Nadir. “Can I join you today, then? You wouldn’t mind, right, Nadir?”

“I would, in fact, mind.”

“If you say no, I’ll keep coming over to invite her to dinner,” Abel insisted, a charming smile still plastered on his face. What a persistent man! He and Nadir truly must’ve had quite the long history.

Frustrated, Nadir instructed Ben to prepare a meal for Abel as well.

Then he glared at me. What for?! It wasn't *my* fault! Right?!

***

"Leave it to a duke to eat this well," Abel remarked. "This tastes amazing!"

Abel was a marquis, I thought to myself. Surely what he ate couldn't be that different from this? Still, I shared in his sentiment that this did, indeed, taste amazing. It was on a whole other level from what I'd eaten back home. One bite and the quality of the ingredients immediately came through.

"Finish your food and go home," Nadir grumbled, his sour mood a stark contrast with the exquisite meal.

"I understand you'd rather be alone with Lady Brianna," Abel replied, "but surely my joining you on occasion isn't that big of an issue. Right?"

Wait, why was he asking *me* that? He was putting me on the spot—and the spot was positively awful! Now Nadir was glaring daggers at me. Why? What'd I do?!

"Now, then," Abel continued, smiling pleasantly. "May I ask what kind of arrangement you have with Nadir, Lady Brianna?"

I twitched involuntarily, and Abel noticed. Nadir was glaring entire swords at me at this point. Look, it wasn't my fault! I wasn't so cold as to remain indifferent in a situation like this!

"What do you mean?" I asked, knowing that trying to divert the topic was pointless but attempting to anyway.

"I understand, Lady Brianna," Abel said, shaking his head and sighing deeply. "You wouldn't consider an engagement with Nadir if you weren't under threat. I know how he is. You couldn't possibly be in love with him, what with his personality and all."

Well, I wouldn't have put it quite *so* harshly. Yes, his personality wasn't exactly stellar, but it wasn't *so* bad... I didn't think...?

"He, ah, he has his good points," I said quietly, suddenly feeling shy for some inexplicable reason.

Abel stared blankly at me for a moment before smiling cheerfully. "Ah, yes, of course! Good to know!"

"Be quiet," Nadir snapped, looking away from me as he spoke. I thought

his ears were a bit flushed. Maybe I was imagining things?

"Well, I for one see *your* good points," Abel said. "So by all means, feel free to openly call me a friend from now on!"

"It seems our guest is leaving," Nadir said to Ben, clearly instructing the butler to kick Abel out.

Flustered, Abel flailed his hands as his droopy eyes drooped further still. "Look, it actually hurt my feelings when you introduced me to Lady Brianna as your 'old acquaintance,' okay?!"

"But we *are* old acquaintances," Nadir pointed out.

"I mean, yes, but still!" Abel continued to protest, but Nadir remained unmoved. Unwilling to push the issue further, Abel turned to me instead. "So, as Nadir's *friend*, I would like to assure you, Lady Brianna, that since you're his future wife, you can always count on me!" he said with a wink.

Maybe he'd shifted targets because Nadir had rejected him.

"Huh," I replied listlessly.

Seeing this, Nadir continued his meal, seemingly less dissatisfied. He was probably pleased, actually. Would it have killed him to show his true emotions sometimes? Granted, though, that side of him was endearing, I thought to myself as I continued to eat.

Abel, meanwhile, remained oblivious, and eagerly continued to try and engage me in conversation. "And when you two have a child, I certainly hope you'll allow me to be the godfather."

"Ben, please do see our guest out," Nadir said.

"Huh? Hey! Wait!" Abel whined as Ben started dragging him away. "Don't be so— Wait, you're actually kicking me out? Hey!"

Nadir, however, continued to deliberately ignore his friend's protests.

"You're horrible!" Abel said to Nadir. "Ah! Lady Brianna! Let us eat dinner together again sometime!"

"Oh. Of course," I replied reflexively.

"You don't need to respond," Nadir interjected as Ben hauled Abel away.

"See you again!" echoed Abel's fading voice.

Ben seemed so used to this. Did this happen often?

"Is he always like this?" I asked.

"He is," Nadir said with an exhausted look on his face. "He always does whatever he wants and throws things into disarray. It's quite the bother."

“Huh...”

“He’s really...” Nadir stopped talking when he noticed me staring at him. “What?”

“Well...” I began, unable to stop myself from breaking into a grin. “I was just thinking it’s nice that you two are *such* good friends.”

Nadir’s face immediately turned red, and he resumed his meal in silence.

It truly was endearing how he couldn’t be honest with his feelings.

***

“I was thinking, ‘Wow, what a heartless friend she is, abandoning me like this,’ and next thing I know, you’re my brother’s fiancée! I just *had* to come over!”

Ohhh no.

I’d been so busy lately that I’d completely forgotten about her. And Leticia, now the crown princess, had come knocking at the Dorman residence, not bothering to hide her displeasure. Also, wearing a dress completely unfit for her station—it would have better suited a simple town girl instead.

She’d definitely sneaked out. She’d *definitely* escaped. Again.

A while back, during one of my visits to the palace, her handmaiden Maria had complained that Leticia, despite being married, was still in the habit of practicing her escape techniques daily. And, of course, poor Maria was the one most affected—and not only by that either. Apparently, the crown princess was quite the prolific prankster as well. This thrilling routine had the poor handmaiden wanting to resign.

As Leticia strode confidently through the house, being well acquainted with the place, I had to rush to follow her. She reached the living room, then boorishly plopped onto the couch, gesturing with her eyes for me to sit across from her.

Which I did, dejectedly.

“So,” she said. “What’s going on?”

What was going on? What was going on, indeed?

I was too deep in debt, so your brother invited me to a party and asked me not only to pretend to be his fiancée, but also to act as his maid, in exchange for paying it all off.

It sounded surreal, put into words like that.

“No one told me you were getting this cozy with my brother!” Leticia said.

True. No one had told her. And that was because we were not, in fact, “getting this cozy.” Still, I couldn’t tell whether or not I should say this to her. Maybe Nadir wanted to deceive even his own sister. I regretted not having asked him earlier.

Leticia had to have heard about this somewhere. Perhaps it was because people had been talking about that incident with Abel. It must’ve been a massive deal to reach the crown princess’s ears. Hopefully the details of what I’d shouted hadn’t made it that far. Surely people would try to keep such salacious details from her, since she was a princess and all. Right? Please? No, really. *Please.*

Vexed, Leticia brought both hands to her face. “I can’t believe you kept this from your own friend!”

“I-I didn’t mean to deceive you or anything,” I tried to explain, sounding more contrite than intended. “I’ve simply been busy and haven’t had time to talk...”

It *was* true that I’d been busy.

Leticia lifted her face, and her expression of sorrow turned into one of shock as she gasped. “Wait. Did you tell your *other* friends?!” she said. “How cruel! You know you and Maria are my only friends!”

Why was she suddenly revealing her depressing social circle to me? Although, to be fair, mine was similarly sad.

“No,” I replied. “No one wants to be friends with someone as debt-ridden as me. Only you, Leticia.”

Her face instantly lit up. She certainly made no effort to hide her emotions. “Right, yes! You don’t seem like the type to have a lot of friends anyway!”

“And what’s *that* supposed to mean?!” I snapped. How rude!

Unfazed, Leticia was once again in high spirits, and asked Ben for tea. “He’s still so inefficient,” she remarked. “A guest comes in and he doesn’t even have tea ready!”

“You can’t make unreasonable demands of people when you drop in unannounced,” I retorted.

To be fair, however, Ben had just been standing there helplessly instead

of doing his job and preparing tea. Her criticism *was* valid. But then, Ben was practically a pet, so it didn't matter.

"So, I've been wondering," Leticia began, making me freeze in place. "What's with that outfit?"

Ah. That *would* be the question to ask, wouldn't it?

It was only a matter of time before she brought it up. In her shoes, I would definitely have asked too. There was no way I wouldn't've. It was really intriguing, after all—her friend was dressed as a maid!

And, yes, I was wearing my maid's uniform. Ever since becoming Nadir's fake fiancée and subsequently his maid, I'd been spending my days in this outfit. But to Leticia, who didn't know about our arrangement, this had to be at the very least curious.

"Wait..." she said, eyeing me suspiciously. "Does my brother have a fetish?"

"Do I have a what, now? Don't be absurd."

Oh, thank goodness. Nadir was home. And Abel was with him, for some reason.

"I mean, look at this! It was clearly made for Brie to wear!" Leticia protested. "You must've had it made in advance, or it wouldn't fit so perfectly!"

I'd been wondering about that too. This maid outfit was exactly my size. My bust was larger than average, so I couldn't wear off-the-rack clothing. It was hard to believe this outfit just happened to fit just right.

Nadir brought a hand to his mouth and pondered this for a moment before saying, "We'd been discussing the possibility of her employment for some time."

Since he hadn't mentioned our situation at all, I caught on that Nadir didn't want Leticia to know about it, and decided to play along for the time being.

"That's right," I said. "That's why he knew my size in advance and got this custom made."

Leticia still wasn't buying it. "Huh... But the uniforms the other maids working here are wearing don't have the lace yours has. He's clearly partial to you."

"You're reading between the lines when there's nothing there," Nadir rebutted a little too quickly. His sister looked even less convinced.

She was right. My uniform was a little different from the others. Although the design was essentially unchanged, the hem on mine did have a hint of lace, and the shape of the buttons was different.

Now she had me wondering if this *was* a fetish of Nadir's. Hmm. Come to think of it, he'd put an awful lot of effort into getting me dolled up for that party where I'd met Abel.

"Nadir!" I exclaimed, clapping my hands together before declaring confidently, "You're a fashionista!"

For some reason, both siblings gave me incredulous looks.

"Yes," Nadir agreed. "That must be it."

"Well," Leticia said, "that settles it, then."

"Why are both of you acting so dismissively all of a sudden?!" And they'd been at odds until moments ago too! Now they were just in agreement, nodding at one another?!

"I get the gist of it now," Leticia mused. "It must be rough on my brother."

"On Nadir?!" I snapped.

"I mean, you know."

I did not! I did not know at all!

In spite of my bafflement, the two of them seemed to have reached a perfect understanding. Must've been a sibling thing.

Abel patted me on the shoulder as I sat there in astonishment. "Lady Brianna, I'm your friend too!" Had he been waiting to say that this entire time? Still, I appreciated the sentiment.

Before I could express that appreciation, however, Leticia cut in. "*I'm* her best friend, though! Right?!"

At the word "right," she gripped my hand, and I inadvertently nodded a few times.

Behind us, Nadir sighed. "We can't have her escaping like this," he said. "We should set a schedule for you to visit Leticia in the future."

I could agree to that.

***

"I wish to go on a date," Nadir said suddenly.

I nodded and waved my hand in a "go ahead" gesture. "Okay. Have

fun.”

“Have you forgotten what our relationship is?”

“Umm, employer and employee?”

He pinched my cheek lightly. “We *are* currently pretending to be engaged.”

“Yes? And since I’m not your real fiancée, I’m just saying you can go on however many dates you please.”

He pinched my other cheek too. “What I’m saying is, we should go on a date and make our relationship status public.”

“Wait, you want to go on a date with *me*?”

“What else could I possibly have meant?” he asked, finally releasing my cheeks.

Wait, so he was actually...? “You’re asking me out on a date!”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to— Ugh, just forget about it,” he muttered with a sigh. Which was the least of my concerns.

I’d never gone on a date before! In fact, I’d never even been asked out on a date! Sadly, the men who had pursued me in the past would ignore me once they learned of my family’s debt. The mere memory was making me tear up. But that was then and this was now! I was going on a date! For work, yes, but a date nonetheless!

“A date...” I murmured, savoring the word on my tongue.

I’d dreamed of it for so long. Eating together at food stalls, wearing the perfect outfits, and ending the day with a flower bouquet in my hands. And then being proposed to, right then and there!

I would not allow anyone to tell me I was delusional. A maiden should be allowed her dreams!

“We’re going to a restaurant favored by the upper echelons of nobility,” Nadir explained.

A restaurant. A restaurant frequented by high-class nobles.

“I hope I don’t mess up,” I mused as my earlier excitement over the date instantly shifted to anxiety. I had no confidence in my etiquette—sadly, I was from a lower-class noble background, and couldn’t pull off the perfect-lady act like Leticia.

“You’ll be fine,” Nadir reassured me. “We’ve been eating together daily, and you’ve been making strides, have you not? There won’t be any issues.”

It was true, yes, that since I’d started working here, I took my morning

and evening meals with Nadir, and he'd been teaching me how to hold the cutlery and so on. I *had* wondered why, but when he'd argued that he couldn't bear the thought of his fiancée—fake or otherwise—being seen as uncultured, I'd had no choice but to comply.

And this was my chance to put all that training to use!

"I've got this!" I declared confidently. "I'll show my perfect table manners!"

Nadir, however, looked concerned. Why?

***

"I-I'm fine. I'm perfectly fine," I muttered to try and reassure myself.

Though I'd brimmed with confidence earlier, the second I stepped foot inside the restaurant, that had all vanished. Nadir gave me an exasperated glance, but what was I supposed to do?! Everywhere I looked, actual, bona fide high-class nobles were dining with poise and grace!

Appearance wise, I was certain I was fine. After all, Nadir had coordinated my entire outfit, just as he had for the party. The dress, the jewelry, the makeup—he had handpicked them all, and his fashion sense was impeccable. Thanks to him, on the outside, I looked like a proper, fine lady. *Strictly* on the outside.

Inside, sadly, I lacked substance.

"I-I'm fine," I chanted to myself again. "I'm fine..." I was not fine.

"Honestly," Nadir muttered. "You're always so confident. Why are you faltering *now*?" Well, that was certainly blunt.

"I have a complex, okay?!" I snapped, glaring at him. Look, I had been a commoner, and an orphan no less. I'd lucked into a noble family, but at my core, I was still a commoner. A *commoner*!

"Why are you always so self-deprecating when it comes to your own background?" Nadir paused before continuing, his tone firm, "You were raised by your parents to be a proper noble lady."

I blinked in surprise at his words. "You're right..."

My adoptive parents had indeed taken me in and raised me with all the love and care they would've offered their own child. Nadir was right. I was my parents' daughter first and a commoner second.

Seeing that I had relaxed, Nadir nodded, just as the food was served.

“You’ll be fine. Just eat.”

“Okay,” I said, then took the knife and fork, careful not to make a sound as I cut into the meat. The smell of the overflowing juices tickled my appetite. I could actually eat here without feeling out of place!

I gave Nadir a joyful glance, and he smiled back at me. Suddenly feeling quite bashful, I looked down at my plate, then brought a piece of steak to my lips. “Oh, it’s delicious!” I exclaimed.

“Good to hear,” Nadir replied.

The meals at his home were, of course, excellent, but dining out felt different. I allowed myself to savor this exceptional dish, of the sort seldom afforded to me, and slowly my nerves began to settle.

And then it occurred to me.

“Um,” I said.

“What?” Nadir replied.

“Uh, isn’t that Abel sitting to our left? Diagonally from here?”

“It is.”

For some reason, there was Abel, dining alone. He was a marquis and his demeanor was elegant, but he still stood out among all the patrons dining with company.

And he wasn’t the only one who stood out like a sore thumb.

“And sitting over there, farther to the left from Abel,” I said. “Isn’t that Leticia?”

“Perhaps,” Nadir replied.

There was no way I’d noticed and Nadir hadn’t. Abel was smiling pleasantly, and Leticia was glaring jealously at us. The contrast was unsettling.

“Um. What’s happening?” I asked.

“Most likely a result of Ben opening his big mouth,” Nadir explained. “Just ignore them.”

“Ignore them, you say...”

Well, I could probably ignore Abel, but Leticia was practically murdering us with her gaze.

“Don’t worry,” Nadir said. “Give it a moment, and...there he is.”

I looked toward the entrance, and in walked a figure, captivating with his elegant stride and beautiful features. His outfit was discreet, blending in with the crowd, but there was no mistaking it—that was the crown prince

himself.

Upon recognizing him, Leticia began to tremble, but soon recomposed herself, likely remembering that she was in public. Truly, halting one's shivers on the spot like that was a very impressive skill.

The crown prince took the seat opposite Leticia's and smiled pleasantly at her. She smiled pleasantly back. Now it just looked like the handsome crown prince and his wife had sneaked out of the palace for a date.

Leticia's hands still trembled slightly, however. No doubt this was yet another of her escapades, and she had come to this restaurant in secret. I could imagine her heart shrieking at the top of its tiny heart-lungs when she saw the crown prince's smile.

But she'd brought this upon herself, and now she had to lie in the bed she'd made.

I decided to focus on my meal. It wasn't often that I got to eat something so delicious, after all! I couldn't simply let it go to waste. Nadir, too, carried on eating, paying no mind to either Leticia or Abel.

Of course, the crown princess yelled at me for this later, but I didn't see what I'd done wrong.

This wouldn't have happened if she hadn't kept trying to run!

***

"I got a giant earful this morning," Ben said, tilting his head. "Why?"

This guy, I swear.

"Ben," I said, "You told Leticia and Abel that Nadir and I were going to that restaurant, didn't you? That's why Nadir was angry at you."

"Whaaat?! I did not!" Ben denied it, seeming truly taken aback.

"Huh. Hmm. Hmmmmm." I eyed him suspiciously. Ben looked back at me with nothing but innocence in his gaze. "You really didn't?"

"I didn't!"

"So you didn't talk to either of them the day before yesterday?"

"I did."

I knew it!

"What did you talk about?"

"They asked me what Young Master Nadir's plans were for the next day."

“And what did you tell them?”

“That he was going to a restaurant.”

“And what else?”

“Umm... They asked about your plans, Anna!”

And there it is.

“You do realize that with that information, they could easily guess we were going on an outing together.”

“Whaaat? I didn’t know that! How was I supposed to know?!”

How, he asked! How, indeed! How was this shining example of manhood ever supposed to know anything at all?!

“If you weren’t an utter moron, you would’ve known!” I snapped. “You’d better apologize to Nadir later, or he may actually ditch you!”

“What?! Nooo!” Ben whined. “I won’t survive if he kicks me out!”

Truly, I could not imagine any scenario in which he would’ve survived outside this estate.

“So, did Miss Leticia and Mister Abel go to the restaurant?” Ben asked.

“They did,” I replied. “And they sat perfectly positioned to watch Nadir and me.”

The butler took his head in his hands. “Nooo! Then the young master’s furious! He was so excited for it too!”

Those words gave me pause. “I’m sorry, did you just say ‘excited’?”

“He spent the whole day before working so hard on picking out a dress for you!” Ben mumbled, on the verge of tears. “And hair accessories! He looked super excited!”

Though the young butler’s sole concern was his scolding, my mind was elsewhere.

“So he was excited,” I mused, inadvertently bringing my hands to my cheeks and grinning. “I see... Hmm... Yes...”

Did this mean that Nadir, despite not showing it at all, had actually been looking forward to going out with me? I might not have fully understood his feelings, but this made me feel warm and fuzzy. I couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Uh, you look creepy, Anna,” Ben said.

“I’m gonna sew your mouth shut,” I snapped.

With a shrill scream, the butler ran away. He was supposed to help me clean, the rascal! I was definitely going to report his slacking later.

***

“Welcome home, Nadir!”

My unusually excited greeting made Nadir take a step back. “What are you plotting?”

“How rude!” I wasn’t plotting anything! I was simply in high spirits! “Now, let’s take off that coat!”

“Right...”

Normally I was reluctant to handle this part of my job, but today I took off his coat lickety-split.

“Now, to change you into your loungewear!”

“Right...?”

I urged him to strip fully, having grown used to this routine by now. Not that I was completely free of any embarrassment, of course. I’d become skilled at undoing his buttons and helping him change with my eyes closed. Maybe I was more dexterous than I gave myself credit for. I had no trouble making clothes for my business, after all.

Nadir inexplicably wished to see me flustered as I helped him change, but that was far too inefficient. He was rather dissatisfied by my proficiency at dressing him quickly.

“It’s much better when you’re shy about it,” he muttered under his breath. “You don’t understand. You don’t—”

“What are you mumbling about?” I asked. He only shook his head in response.

Once he was fully changed, I psyched myself up.

“Now then, I’ll wash your back today!” I said.

“What?!” he exclaimed, his face turning bright red.

I snickered. “I heard you were excited for our date!” I told him. “That you were antsy, fussing over the perfect dress!”

“What?! How do you—”

“Ben told me.”

“That mutt...”

So he did think of Ben as a dog. Which, to be fair, the young man *was* more dog than butler. And not a very smart dog either.

“If you were that anxious about it...”

Nadir gulped at my words, his eyes growing a little glossy, as if he was

anticipating something. No worries! I knew exactly what this was!

"This was your first date, wasn't it?" I asked.

"Huh?" Nadir stared blankly at me, his lips parting open.

Gently, I took his hand, and it twitched slightly in response. Oh, I knew what this reaction meant. I had everything figured out.

I shook my head. "You were excited about your very first date, right? It's okay."

"What?" he said, sounding displeased this time.

"And I bet you were really disappointed that Leticia and Abel intruded!"

Nadir sighed despondently. I knew it! He was devastated!

"So I'll wash your back! Help cheer you up!" I offered. "Since that was your first date, no one's ever washed your back before, right? Oh, I'll be fully clothed, of course, and I'll keep my eyes closed, but still! It's supposed to be a romantic thing for men, right?"

Nadir said nothing in response. Poor thing! Personally, I'd been ecstatic enough just to be asked on my first-ever date, but surely Nadir had wanted his to be perfect.

"Come on! Don't be sad! It was my first date too, which was—"

A bit of a shame, I wanted to say, but the words died in my throat when he squeezed my hand back.

"Is that true?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"That it was your first date."

"Um, yes?" Sadly, no man brave enough to ask out the daughter of a debt-ridden baron had come my way.

Nadir stiffened at my answer, for some reason. Why was his face so red? Had the warm bath gotten to him before he even stepped into the tub?

"Listen," he said, gripping my hand tightly. "It's too early for a bath."

Too early? What did he mean by that?

"Let me rest my head on your lap instead."

***

Why was this happening?

As per Nadir's request, I'd moved to the couch so he could lie on my lap. I'd sat on the edge, and Nadir had lain down fully.

And, of course, he'd put his head on my lap.

No, really. *Why* was this happening?

I'd thought Nadir had been excited for his first-ever date. We'd been first-date buddies! That was cute! Also, I'd figured he might've been disappointed that people had intruded on our date, so I'd offered to wash his back. Why? Because I remembered that, recently, Abel had told me this was a romantic gesture for men.

Clearly, I'd been out of my damn mind to suggest this. Getting caught up in the heat of the moment was going to be the death of me. I was fully aware of this now. Thankfully, he hadn't gone along with that plan. Fortunately, Nadir had kept his composure. I'd almost done something that would've rendered me unmarriageable!

Wait. Had he *really* kept his composure, though?

I stroked Nadir's head as it rested on my thighs. He squirmed a bit. Was he ticklish?

"Um, Nadir?" I said.

"Yes?"

"What are we doing, exactly?"

"I'm resting my head on your lap."

Well, yes. I knew *that*. That wasn't what I was asking.

"Um..."

"What?"

"Nothing..."

I decided it was best to keep quiet.

His head felt quite heavy on my lap. Was my own this heavy, I wondered? Feeling the weight against me, I occasionally stroked his hair. It felt like I had a cat napping on me, except it was the head of a twenty-two-year-old man.

He was kind of cute, though. Nadir was precious when he was quiet. Occasionally, he nuzzled my palm. Okay, this was *very* cute. He was a grown man. Was it appropriate to find a grown man "cute"? Well, no matter. He was cute indeed.

As I continued to stroke his head, I began to nod off. Nadir, too, looked like he was drifting to sleep.

My heavy eyelids were about to succumb when the door suddenly flew open with a loud bang.

"You guys! The food's getting cold—"

Only then did Ben notice Nadir and me, and promptly turned red as a tomato.

"I-I saw nothing!" he stammered. "I didn't see you guys do anything indecent! At all! Really!"

"We weren't doing anything indecent in the first place!" I protested. Despite denying his wild assumption, however, I still blushed.

"You inopportune little..." Nadir begrudgingly sat up. "Ben, why do you *always* have to get in the way?"

"Eek! You're mad at me!" Sensing Nadir was about to rip him a new one, the butler timidly moved behind me on the couch and gripped my shoulders.

This incensed Nadir further, and he quickly yanked Ben away from me, leaning in close to the butler's face. "Now listen here, Ben," he said sharply. "Do not touch Brianna so casually. Remember this, and remember it well. Understand?"

"Y-Yesh, shir!" Ben stuttered.

Nadir, seemingly satisfied, turned to me. "We'll continue this another time."

"What?" I asked. "I thought this was a onetime thing..." I meant to say more, but he glared at me, and I quickly nodded instead. Why was he threatening me? All I'd wanted was to comfort him! I'd been doing him a kindness!

Ben, having cheered up a bit, suddenly piped up. “Oh! Lady Leticia asked me to inform her if you did anything inappropriate, Young Master. Shall I let her know?”

“Absolutely not!” Nadir and I replied in perfect sync.

Rattled, Ben replied simply, “Okay.”

***

“A woman’s friendship is so fleeting.”

I’d gone to visit Leticia at the royal palace, and now she was glaring resentfully at me.

“Hm? What do you mean?” I asked. Why was she looking at me like that?

She shook her head. “It’s all right. I understand. This is just how it is...”

Maria, the handmaiden standing beside the rather melodramatic Leticia, handed me a book for some reason. “Her Highness read this recently.”

“Let’s see,” I said. “*Friendships and New Love*? What is this, a tale about broken friendships?”

“She has been rather anxious because of it,” Maria explained.

“Mariaaa!” Leticia snapped, snatching the book from her handmaiden. “Shush!” Maybe she was embarrassed that she’d been reading a romance novel; she returned it to the bookshelf with a faint blush on her cheeks.

Incidentally, wasn’t every book in this room handpicked by the crown prince? Was he indirectly implying Leticia should prioritize love over friendship? My curiosity about the book lineup was short-lived, however, as Leticia’s annoyance forced me to pry my gaze away from the shelves.

“You’d rather keep my brother company than me, huh, Brie?!” she said. Why? Why would she say that? “I-I mean, you haven’t been coming to the palace much!”

“I’m busy with work,” I explained. “What did you expect?”

“But you could at least come more often!”

“Uh, okay...” Why did it feel like I was being chastised like a husband who was barely ever home?

“I mean, isn’t friendship the most important thing of all?! Isn’t it?!”

“Her Highness read this recently as well,” Maria said.

“*Gauging Distance in Friendships*... And it opens by saying you should

keep a moderate distance.”

“Maria!” Leticia protested. “This is just for reference! For *reference*!” It was most definitely not just for reference. “Look, that’s not the point! My problem here is...” Leticia snatched the book from me, gripping it so tightly it creaked. I hoped the poor book would survive. “It feels like I’m losing to my brother!” Maybe she was agitated, because she put the book back in place a little too roughly. “I can’t stand losing to *him* of all people!” she stressed. “I hate it! You understand my feelings, don’t you?!”

“Uh, not really, since I don’t have siblings...”

“Ugh! You just don’t get it!” she snapped, waving her hands in frustration.

It wasn’t as though I was choosing not to understand!

Maria tapped me on the shoulder. “She’s just jealous. Don’t mind her.” She had a muffin in her mouth as she spoke. When did that happen? Today’s muffins were delicious, though. There were various kinds, but I was particularly fond of the chocolate ones. Truly delectable.

“Mariaaa!” Leticia snapped.

Jealousy, huh. I wasn’t close enough to Nadir to warrant that level of jealousy! Well, lately he *had* been a little nicer to me, I thought. And I did think he was cute, sometimes. And he did rest his head on my lap.

“See! You’re thinking of something and blushing!” Leticia exclaimed. “This is why I was opposed to you two living together! You must be doing unspeakable things with him! I’m sure of it!”

“Would you not drag me into your wildly salacious delusions?!” I demanded.

“I am *not* delusional!”

“She recently read a book titled *Suddenly Married! My Husband Is Surprisingly Gentle*, you see,” Maria informed me.

“Mariaaa!”

My goodness. Would she please stop being influenced by books? Wait, had the prince chosen those too? Oh no. I couldn’t keep thinking about it! I was getting curious!

Shaking my head, I sipped on my tea.

“Men are wolves!” Leticia said.

“That, by the way, was in a book she read recently called—”

“Mariaaa!”

Right. Yes. I couldn't afford to give in to my curiosity.

But I did think perhaps I'd borrow *Gauging Distance in Friendships*.

***

There was one thing I had yet to ask about.

I was having dinner with Nadir when I broached the topic. "Am I allowed to carry on with my business?"

Nadir blinked. "You're no longer in debt."

"Oh, not because of that," I said, shaking my head. "It's more like a hobby now." Yes, originally I'd started the business to repay what my family owed, but I'd wound up genuinely enjoying it. The earnings never had amounted to more than covering interest payments, but still. "I'd like to continue doing it, but I *am* your fiancée right now. If it poses a problem for you, I'll stop."

I didn't want to, not really, but I didn't have a choice either. Upper-ranked noblewomen running businesses was unheard of. I wasn't sure why—perhaps it was frowned upon by their noble husbands.

"I don't see the issue," Nadir said readily, despite my reservations. "Do as you please."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes. Do what you want."

"But I've never heard of the wife of a high-ranking noble having a job."

Nadir put down his fork. "That's because they can afford not to work, not because there's a rule preventing them from doing so."

"Would people not gossip about it?"

"That's where Leticia comes in handy, no?"

Leticia? Really?

Seeing me tilt my head in confusion, Nadir explained, "You've been doing business without choosing your clientele so far, but you may want to set that aside for the moment and focus on Leticia and other nobles. And start with making Leticia your priority."

"Why?"

Nadir signaled for Ben to bring him a drink before replying, "Despite her personality, Leticia *is* the crown princess. She's popular. If she's fond of one particular business, people will naturally be drawn to it and place their

trust in it.”

“You have a point...”

“Not only that, few would dare criticize a woman so favored by the crown princess. So you’d be able to keep running your business without worry.”

“Right...” In other words, doing business primarily with the crown princess would ensure smooth sailing for me. “You’re right. Now that I think about it, Leticia is tremendously influential.”

“Exactly. Despite everything, she’s the future queen.”

“Right, she *is* the crown princess despite everything.”

Things like her tendency to run away and how weirdly quick on her feet she was were irrelevant. She was the future queen and able to act the part perfectly in public. Honestly, it gave me whiplash. One moment she’d be scampering around, and the next she’d be walking gracefully and waving to everyone at some formal event or another. How could anyone switch so quickly?

“So don’t worry about what others might say,” Nadir said. “Do as you please. I don’t make it a habit to chain women down.”

“Nadir...” Oh, that almost brought a tear to my eye! I was so moved I was willing to ignore his blatant omission of the fact that he had chained *me* down with debt repayment.

To be fair, he’d helped me in so many ways. Truly, the man was my savior. I had a place to sleep and high-quality food to eat, and while I certainly had a number of duties as a maid, the work wasn’t taxing. Going on dates with him was fun too.

Why, there were no downsides!

“Nadir, is there nothing you want me to do for you?” I asked hesitantly.

“Why the sudden question?” he asked in turn, eyeing me curiously.

“I mean, objectively speaking, I think you’re getting the short end of the stick here.”

“Oh, that? Don’t worry about it. It’s thanks to you that I don’t have to deal with others playing Cupid.”

“But I still want to thank you somehow,” I protested. “Name something! Anything.”

Nadir paused at my words before breathing a deep sigh. “I have something important to tell you.”

“Yes?”

“Never give a man carte blanche to ask anything he wants of you,” he warned. “You might not like the results.”

“Huh?” I looked at him, confused as to what he meant.

“There are many in this world who would take that very literally.”

“Oh?”

“So it’s best not to say something like that so flippantly if you want to stay out of trouble.”

Um. What? I wasn’t trying to be flippant! I was only trying to show gratitude.

Nadir noticed my flustered expression and gasped, eyeing me intensely. “Wait. You haven’t made that offer to anyone before, have you?!”

“I-I have not!” I replied quickly. Scary.

“Really?! You haven’t said that to Ben, right?!”

“Why Ben specifically?!”

“Well, he *is* dense and might not understand the implications,” Nadir mused. “Still, I would be pretty annoyed if he got to hear that before I did.”

“He didn’t! I’ve only ever made the offer to you!”

Nadir brought a hand to his mouth.

“What?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing,” he replied. “I’m just a bit...overcome.”

“Overcome with what?” I asked, confused. “Nausea?”

Nadir pressed a palm to his chest and sighed.

“Um, you’re not feeling sick or anything, right?” I said.

“No, I’m fine,” he assured me. “I just need a moment.”

“Oh?”

What kind of symptom was that? Had he had too much to eat?

“Listen,” he said sternly. “This is important, so I need you to promise me.”

“Promise what?”

“That you’ll never make that offer to another man,” he insisted vehemently. “Never!”

“Fine! Gosh!”

The matter of my gratitude was pushed aside. I wasn’t sure what any of that meant, so I tried asking Ben the next day.

“And you think *I’d* know that?” was his response. I gave up.

Men.

***

There were more ways to express gratitude than simply asking what someone wanted, I'd realized.

And so I'd been working hard during my spare time to show Nadir my appreciation.

Hopefully, I'd be done within the week. The weather had turned chilly lately; winter truly was upon us. I wanted to finish it before the cold really set in.

I'd sacrificed sleep in the name of my endeavors, and it hadn't escaped Nadir's notice. "You have dark circles under your eyes," he told me. "Have you not been sleeping well?"

"Um, I-I've been sleeping just fine," I stammered.

"Those dark circles, though."

"It's been quite cold, which has made it harder to fall asleep. Perhaps that's it."

Nadir didn't seem entirely convinced, but he didn't press further, thank goodness. I let out a sigh, relieved. See, I wanted to keep it a secret until it was done.

I worked hard that night too. In fact, it was almost complete. I should've been able to finish it. *Just a bit longer*, I thought.

And then came a knock on my door. "Brianna? Are you in there?"

It was Nadir. No one else would've come knocking on my door in the middle of the night.

"Oh! J-Just a moment, please!" I said in a panic, hiding the fruits of my labor under a pillow. After confirming it was safely out of sight, I called out to Nadir. "C-Come in."

He pushed open the door and walked in. "You looked unwell, so I came to check on you."

"But I wasn't unwell."

"Liar," he said, reaching out to rub the circles under my eyes. "You clearly haven't been sleeping."

I flinched at the sudden touch. *Don't do that!*

As I struggled to come up with an excuse, seeing Nadir's genuine

concern made guilt bubble up in my chest. What was the point of trying to do something for him if I was causing him worry in the process?

Resigned, I pulled out the near-complete item from underneath the pillow and handed it to Nadir.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“A scarf.”

I’d made it with the incoming cold in mind. I knew it wasn’t suited for use on formal occasions or at work, but I’d figured he could wear it during his occasional outings to town, or when out in the garden. I took pride in my knitting skills, so I knew the finish was quite decent.

“And you’re giving this to someone?” Nadir asked with a trembling hand. Huh. Was something about it funny to him?

“Yes. To you,” I said. I’d wanted to surprise him with it, honestly, but this would have to do. “I wanted to express my gratitude. It’s handmade, so it’s not quite high quality, but I think I did fairly well. Don’t you?”

I looked to Nadir, hoping for a compliment, but he just stood there frozen, scarf in hand.

“F-For me?” he stammered.

“Well, the other day I said I’d do anything you asked of me and you turned me down,” I explained. “So I figured I’d make you something myself. Do you not like it?”

I thought I’d done a good job, but perhaps to Nadir, who’d grown up in the lap of luxury, it looked crude.

Noticing my anxiety, he spoke. “Quite the contrary! It’s rather well-made!”

A relieved sigh escaped my lips.

“Um, thank you,” he added bashfully. Thank goodness. He liked it.

“Oh, one more thing,” I said, pulling a box from underneath my bed. “Here. The rest.”

“The rest?” he asked as he took the box.

“Yes! Open it!” I urged him with a smile.

Nadir opened the box as instructed, and his expression turned to shock. “This is...”

I chuckled, pleased with his reaction. “It’s not just the scarf! I made you gloves too, plus socks and a belly warmer for you to wear to sleep! It’s been cold lately, right?”

“Socks and...a belly warmer...”

“My parents are getting on in years,” I explained. “I often made these things for them, to help them fend off the cold! I think they came out quite nicely. Don’t you?”

“Y-Yes.”

Phew! My hard work had paid off!

“I’m getting the same treatment as her parents... If I think about it as being considered part of her family, then...” Nadir trailed off.

He’d mumbled so quietly that I hadn’t heard him at all. Huh. Well, either way, he’d enjoyed his gifts, so perhaps I’d knit him a sweater next. And woolen underpants? My parents used to love them, but I wasn’t sure whether Nadir would.

I was so lost in thought that I didn’t notice Nadir’s deep sigh.

***

I’d been living at the manor for six months now. Time really flew.

As I set the table for dinner, I thought back on my time here. To a young woman, six months were quite precious, indeed.

With a small sigh, I took a seat. Nadir remained adamant that we take our meals together.

“What’s wrong, Lady Brianna?” asked Nadir’s self-appointed friend, Abel, noticing my gloom. Self-appointed, incidentally, because Abel’s “friend” had never confirmed said friendship. Poor guy.

I looked into Abel’s droopy eyes and let out another sigh. “I’m homesick.”

Nadir, Abel, and even Ben, who stood behind them, all exchanged glances.

“You don’t seem the type to get homesick,” Nadir remarked. The other two nodded in agreement, likely sharing the sentiment.

Now what was *that* supposed to mean?!

“I’m homesick,” I repeated, defiantly ignoring Nadir’s words.

“For someone who loudly announced in front of a crowd that she’s still a virgin, you’re oddly sensitive,” Abel said.

“I didn’t think people who mocked others for wetting the bed could get homesick,” Ben added.

Apparently neither of them thought I could, in fact, be homesick. What did they even think of me? I mean, yes, I *had* loudly proclaimed my virginity, but not without a reason! I was no deviant! Also, the bedwetting incident had happened ages ago. That didn't count!

"I'm homesick," I repeated yet again, ignoring the two of them as well.

Nadir seemed conflicted.

Perhaps one more time would do it, I thought. "I'm homesick."

And it did! Nadir raised his hands in surrender. "Fine. Go home for a bit."

"Yes!" I exclaimed, beaming. "Thank you, Nadir!"

In response to my excitement, Nadir turned his face away. Um, rude? I was trying to show my appreciation here!

***

It *was* true that I was homesick. Really. It was the first time I'd been apart from my parents for so long. I was dying to visit home.

Despite being quite pleased with having obtained permission to do so, though, I couldn't rejoice, deep down.

"Your hometown is quite rural."

Why was he coming with me?! Finally I got to return home, and Nadir just had to be there too for some reason. Baffling, truly.

"Um," I mumbled. "I wanted to go by myself."

"Bit late for that."

Fair.

The carriage was only an hour away from my parents' estate at this point. It would've been inefficient to turn back now.

"You know there's nothing of note back at my home, right?" I asked.

"That's fine. I'm not expecting anything."

Well, that annoyed me a little. I mean, yes, there was barely anything there, but it was still my parents' beloved home! Displeased, I puffed out my cheeks. Rude jerk!

Noticing my mood, Nadir handed me a pastry. "It's popular in the capital," he said. "Here. Eat."

As if I'd take anything from some jerk who trash-talks my hometown! I thought, but then again, a trending dessert from the capital was very

tempting indeed. Nadir was offering me a cupcake, topped with sugar confections. The decoration was colorful and pleasing to the eye, *and* the smell was incredible. Unable to resist, I took it and brought it to my lips.

"Oh, it's delightful!" I exclaimed.

It pained me to admit, but I was a self-serving woman, and far too easy to placate with food besides. I was still savoring the first cupcake when Nadir handed me another. How could I have refused? In it went. Ah, so good. *So* good.

I was so busy being engrossed in my cupcakes, and thinking that if there were any left I'd give them to my parents, that I didn't notice Nadir's expression at all.

***

Home sweet home.

"Father! Mother! I'm home!" I exclaimed in high spirits as I opened the doors. I'd sent them a letter in advance informing them of my arrival, so they were quick to come over to the parlor to see me.

"Welcome home, Brianna," said my mother as I leaped into her warm embrace. My father, who arrived shortly after, watched us with a gentle smile.

"And welcome to my humble home, Lord Nadir," he said.

"Apologies for the short notice," Nadir replied.

"Oh no, please, we're nothing but grateful for all you've done for us."

My father's cheeks seemed fuller than I remembered. So were my mother's hands as she ushered me inside. Perhaps they were eating better now that Nadir had taken over their debt.

We reached the living room and a maid served us tea.

"You have our thanks for providing us with a maid."

"And guards..."

Ah, the tea this maid brewed was leagues above anything I could make. It figured, I thought. She did use to work at a duke's estate, and— Wait. Guards? What guards? I knew about the maid, of course, but guards were news to me.

"It's no problem," Nadir said with a polite smile. Where was that charming smile whenever he spoke to *me*? Hmph. "It's the least I could do,

having taken your precious daughter from you. Please do rest assured I will continue to arrange for these services."

My parents thanked him for the assurance. "As for your accommodations," my mother said, bringing a hand to her cheek in a measured gesture, "you mentioned wanting to share a room with Brianna. Is that right?"

***

"What the hell?!" I demanded, confronting Nadir as we stood in my old childhood bedroom.

The nostalgic room was almost exactly as I remembered, except for one detail: a bigger bed. My parents were shameless. Shameless, I tell you! They'd said, "What an incredible catch, Brianna," and also, "He's a good man, so don't let him get away," and then left me there with my jaw hanging open in shock!

"You lied to my parents and said we were *actually* engaged, didn't you?!" I said, fuming. It made no sense otherwise. My parents had to have believed Nadir truly planned on marrying me.

Nadir, who'd made himself quite comfortable, answered simply, "Obviously." The nerve! The man was just lounging around on the bed!

"Why?!" I asked. "Go clear things up with them right now!"

"I don't see the problem here."

"I'm literally looking at the problem!" There was only one bed, and it was his fault!

"One never knows how word might get out," Nadir cautioned. "If we're going to lie, we need to lie to everyone."

"What manner of villainous thought process..." It reminded me of the culprit's words in a suspense novel I'd read recently. "Also, what's this about guards?"

"Guards are for guarding," Nadir said flatly. "You're my fiancée, and I'm a duke's son. There are more risks involved. Something might happen to your family."

Now that he mentioned it...he did have a point. "You're right. Sorry I doubted you."

"What do you mean, you doubted me?"

“I mean, I thought maybe you had them under surveillance...”

“What kind of monster do you think I am?” he asked with a sigh before pushing himself up. “Well, either way, I’m staying the night here.”

“You’re not leaving?”

“Negative,” he replied immediately.

“Right,” I mumbled, taking a seat on a nearby chair. “And you won’t do anything while we sleep?”

“I won’t.”

“Really? Truly? Seriously?”

“Really. Truly. Seriously.”

Instead of being reassured, I found myself annoyed at his confirmation. “Right. Of course. You wouldn’t be interested in the likes of me!” I grumbled, trying to hide my annoyance.

Nadir sighed deeply. I was the one who should’ve been sighing!

“By the way,” he said, still lounging on the bed, “this is the first time we’re sharing a bed, hmm?”

“What?!” Sharing a bed?! I very nearly fell out of my chair in shock.

Exasperated, Nadir stood and caught me. Before I could thank him, he scooped me up into his arms, then gently laid me down on the bed.

I didn’t even get the chance to fully appreciate being carried bridal-style for the first time in my life. Next thing I knew, I was on the bed, and Nadir had joined me. My brain was pure, confused mush.

“Wh-Wh-Wh—”

Seeing me unable to form coherent words, Nadir smiled. His face was closer to mine than I’d expected, and my heart did a little flip.

“We’ve already bathed, so all that’s left is to sleep,” he said. “Good night.”

“Oh, uh, um... Good night...?” I replied reflexively.

Nadir pulled a blanket over me. That was nice. Warm. Then he slipped under the covers too, presumably to sleep.

“Wait! Wait a second!” I said.

“Dammit,” he muttered. “Returned to your senses, have you?”

I’d *almost* gotten too caught up in the moment! This was unacceptable. Sharing a bed was absolutely out of the question! No way!

“I-I’ll sleep on the couch!” I offered.

“That’s no place for a woman to sleep,” Nadir remarked. Ugh! I didn’t

want him to do this gentlemanly nonsense!

“Th-Then you should sleep on the couch!”

“And why in blazes would I do that with such a large bed available?” he asked, showing no intention of moving.

Why in blazes, he asked! Why indeed!

“We’re a grown man and woman, is why!” I snapped, my cheeks reddening.

Nadir grinned. “So what you’re saying is you see me as a real man.”

“Y-You very literally *are* a man!”

Nuh-uh. I was not backing down! It was unfathomable for an unmarried man and woman to share a bed!

“I-If the couch isn’t acceptable,” I ventured, “I’ll take the guest bedroom __”

“And if I allow my fiancée to sleep in the guest room, people will think we had a fight,” Nadir said.

“Ugh...”

He was right. Since my parents had specifically prepared a room with a large bed at Nadir’s behest, if their daughter suddenly chose to sleep in the guest bedroom, it would raise concerns. To them, Nadir was a wonderful fiancé, the man who had paid off their debt.

“Just...don’t do anything,” I mumbled.

“What do you mean, ‘anything’?” he asked.

Ugh! Cheeky bastard! He *knew* what he was doing! I didn’t bother replying to his question and simply turned around. I could hear him chuckle behind me. Damn him for making fun of me!

“Good night!” I snapped.

“Good night.”

***

Sleep was impossible, of course.

I could feel Nadir behind me, and my eyes stayed wide open. Winks were not caught. Sheep were not counted. Which, I mean—obviously. There was a man slumbering right next to me. How was I supposed to fall asleep under these circumstances? I wasn’t.

I wondered if Nadir was actually sleeping. My curiosity piqued, I

pretended to turn over, just to steal a glance in his direction.

“Eep!”

He was awake. Our eyes met instantly.

“What’s the matter?” he said.

“Uh, nothing. Nothing,” I stammered, unable to admit that my thoughts had been too preoccupied with him to drift off.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked, scooting closer. We were already fairly close, and now the distance had turned even more intimate. My heart was thrumming.

His handsome features were only inches away. We were so close that I was sure he could feel my every breath. The thunder in my chest refused to still.

“Are you cold?” Nadir asked, weirdly. I wasn’t moving, so where had he gotten that idea?

And then he wrapped an arm around my back, pressing our bodies together.

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!

The scream stayed in my head, but my body flushed all over.

“U-Um,” I stammered.

“Hmm?” Nadir wasn’t teasing me anymore. Now he just looked at me intently, waiting for me to say something.

“N-Nothing,” was all I managed as my cheeks burned bright red.

“I see,” he said as he gently lifted my head and slid an arm underneath.

Oh! He wanted me to use his arm as a pillow. Not in a million years had I thought this would happen, and my heart raced even quicker. Honestly, I’d always thought this was a dreamy gesture. The circumstances weren’t what I’d imagined, but this was indeed the very act I’d fantasized about. A bit rougher in reality than I’d pictured in my head, but something about it felt comforting, and I inadvertently let out a small, relieved sigh.

Nadir moved his hand to gently stroke my head. “Are you sleepy yet?”

“Mmh,” I mumbled, feeling his warmth as I began to drift off.

I was under the impression he was smiling softly at me. A weak smile played upon my own lips in turn.

As sleep began to claim me, I thought I felt a gentle touch on my forehead.

***

I'd slept like a baby.

Unbelievable. How could I have slept so soundly given the circumstances? Also, what was I supposed to do now? I was still lying on Nadir's arm. Had it not gone numb? Was he okay? Concerned, I tried to gently pull away without waking him, but before I had the chance to, his eyes slowly fluttered open.

"U-Um," I mumbled. I was sure my face was visibly bright red now. At night, perhaps it had gone unnoticed, but it was morning now, and he could definitely tell what color my skin was.

"Already awake?" he asked. I nodded, and his arm tightened around me, pulling me into a hug. "Five more minutes."

My heart was about to leap out of my throat. "N-Nadir!" I called out, unable to contain myself any longer.

He reluctantly loosened his grip and looked at me. "Was that too tight?" he asked, leaning in with concern.

"N-No, that's not..." My heart was practically galloping now. Could he please not look at me in such an intoxicating fashion first thing in the morning?! "I-I'm going to die," I stammered, pressing a hand to my chest.

At those words, Nadir bolted upright. A part of me mourned the loss of my arm pillow. "Are you feeling sick?!" he exclaimed, genuinely worried.

And my heart, of course, fluttered all over again. "N-No, I'm just...embarrassed," I explained, my face likely red beyond belief.

Nadir let out a sigh of relief, then smiled. Wickedly. "Did my closeness have that effect on you?"

Ugh! This cretin! He'd been such a gentleman the night before!

"Yes! It did!" I snapped. "So let go!"

Seemingly satisfied with my response, Nadir released his grip. Goodness. My day had hardly begun and I was already drained.

In contrast with my exhaustion, Nadir sat up, looking fully refreshed. "Get me dressed."

Really? Today, of all days? Give me a break...

He did not give me a break.

***

“There really is nothing here,” Nadir mused.

“Go home, then,” I retorted.

I’d swallowed my embarrassment and hurriedly helped Nadir get dressed before breakfast. I was exhausted, and so I’d wanted to stay in my room afterward, but Nadir had felt restless with nothing to do. We’d decided to take a stroll in the area around the house.

It wasn’t true that there was *nothing* here. The main industry of our lands was agriculture, so there was simply a lot of nature. That was all. And farming brought in good profits. The only reason we’d been in dire straits had been our massive debt. Without it, we’d have been decently wealthy.

We reached an open area by the mountains behind the estate. There were chairs here, so I figured it’d be a nice place for us to relax.

“Where are we?” Nadir asked.

“My childhood playground,” I said. “My parents made it for me.”

There was a swing hanging from a tree, a sandbox, a small pond, and a slide, all built by my parents to help keep me entertained. Feeling nostalgic, I took a seat on the swing.

“Hey. You’re gonna break that,” Nadir cautioned.

“Rude! I’m not that heavy!” I protested. Still, it could have deteriorated over time, so I decided not to use it after all. “The swing was my favorite part of the playground.”

As a child, I’d swing really high, then jump. I couldn’t do that now, of course. The odds of incurring a nasty injury were too great.

Nadir’s gaze flitted between me and the other pieces of equipment in the playground. “Don’t even think about using the slide.”

“Why?”

“Your butt will get stuck.”

“Wow! Rude!” I mean, yes, it was for children, but my derriere wasn’t *that* big! “Hmph! Just watch! I’ll slide down perfectly!”

“Hey! Don’t be stupid!”

Ignoring his warning, I rushed to the slide. As a child, it’d seemed so tall! Now it really wasn’t anything special.

Nadir gave me an exasperated look from the bottom of the slide. What?! I could do it just fine!

I sat down to prepare. It was a bit of a tight fit, yes, but it was fine! No problem! I released the sides, and slowly began to glide down. See? Easy.

Proudly, I looked down at Nadir, who just kept staring up at me with that same look of exasperation.

This was still fun as an adult, I mused to myself as I smoothly slid downward. And just as I felt like a child all over again, my gleeful glide turned into a dreary drag.

Oh no.

My cheeks paled as I got a sinking feeling in my gut, but it was too late... I was stuck halfway down.

"..."

"..."

Nadir and I exchanged glances. "I told you so," he said.

"Urk..." There was nothing I could say to that. I tried to shift, but remained firmly lodged in place. "N-Nadir," I mumbled.

"Yes?" he replied.

"I can't get out..."

"Are you stupid?"

Yes! Yes, I was, okay?!

My eyes welled with tears as I looked down at Nadir. It would've been a delightful sight, if not for my predicament.

"Please. Help me," I begged.

"For crying out loud," he grumbled, still with that same incredulous look, but he reached out a hand. As soon as I grabbed it, he yanked me off the slide.

"Wh-Whoa!" I lost my balance and fell. Thankfully, the sandbox was below, but it still hurt. "Oww..."

"Did you hurt yourself?" Nadir asked as I sat on his torso, lifting his head to look at me.

And then he froze.

"Nadir?"

"Your skirt..."

"Huh?" My skirt?

I looked down and, to my horror, saw my skirt completely upturned as I sat with my knees in the air. Meaning, Nadir had a full, unobstructed view of everything underneath.

"Eek!" In a panic, I fixed my skirt and closed my legs. I wasn't married yet! This was a disaster! A *disaster*! "Nooo," I whined. "I'll never be able

to marry...”

“Uh. You’ll be fine,” Nadir said.

“Huh?” I tilted my head in confusion, and Nadir turned away. Huh. Why did it feel like something like this had happened before?

“I’ll just marry you myself, then,” came a memory from the recesses of my brain.

“Oh. Oh!” I exclaimed.

Startled by my sudden yelping, Nadir flinched.

“Oh. Oh no. Oh nooo,” I lamented. This couldn’t be happening! Not again! “The boy I had my first-ever crush on saw my undergarments too!”

My loud bawling echoed through the playground.

***

“I really don’t think a panty incident or two is that big of a deal.”

“...”

“Sometimes people just see things, even if you don’t want them to.”

“...”

Was that meant to be comforting? I didn’t know.

I sniffled and sobbed. “My beautiful first love...is over...”

“Stop crying over something that happened so long ago,” Nadir said.

A long whine escaped my lips. “He must remember me as some sort of deviant...”

“You think that’s what someone that young would think about some silly children’s panties?”

“Oh, you’re so mean,” I whimpered. “They were adorable, they had this bear print...”

“So...silly children’s panties, then.”

Silly children’s panties were still panties!

At a loss for what to do about the sobbing mess I’d turned into, Nadir paced restlessly around the room. He stopped abruptly, sighed, then snatched away the blanket I’d draped over my head.

“Nooo!” I wailed. “Give it back!”

“No.”

“Tyrant!” I tried to take back my stolen blanket, but I was no match for Nadir’s strength and only managed to pull myself closer to him. “Urk...

Stop looking at me... I look awful from all that crying...”

“I’ve seen this an awful lot of times by now.”

“You’re supposed to say I don’t look that bad or something, even if you don’t mean it...” I mumbled, rubbing my nose on Nadir’s clothes as I sniffled loudly. Take that! Be annoyed! “I’m just a little heartbroken, okay? A memory I thought was beautiful turned out to actually be embarrassing...”

I should’ve probably been relieved to at least have been wearing my favorite bear panties, but the waterworks wouldn’t stop. How complicated a maiden’s heart could be.

“Who cares what kind of panties they were?” Nadir asked.

Another sob. “The problem is that he saw them...”

As I whined about no man wanting me for a wife after this, Nadir began to stroke my head. I realized then that he’d sat down on the bed next to me at some point.

“Like I said...” He hesitated, opening his mouth several times as if trying to decide what to follow up with. Finally, he looked me straight in the eye with that infuriatingly handsome face of his.

I pressed a hand to my chest, trying to conceal the flutter of my heart as I waited for him to continue.

Nadir swallowed hard. “I’ll just marry you myself, then.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I told you this a long time ago.”

A long time...ago...

Nadir’s cheeks reddened, but he didn’t avert his gaze. His expression reminded me of someone, but who...?

Wait. Right, that boy was making this face too—

“Huh?”

Come to think of it, his hair was this same color.

“Huh?”

And his eyes too. And they glistened a little from embarrassment, just like this.

“Huh?”

I was so stunned that my tears receded.

No one told me my first love had been right here this whole time!

***

“I...what? Wait. Wait a second...”

The shock was so great that my brain couldn’t function properly. Wait, so...*Nadir* was the boy from my memories? And I’d been saying...what was it? Oh, had I just...had I actually...

I-I’d told the man himself that he’d been my first love!

“Oh. Oh, oh no, oh no, no, no, no—” I stammered in a panic.

“Hey! There, there!” Nadir said, rubbing my back. “Breathe! Come on. In...out...”

“I’m not giving birth or anything!” I mean, the breathing technique was good, just not very fitting for right now! “Since when?! Since when have you known?!”

“Well, since...” Nadir mumbled, hesitating for a moment before finally whispering, “Since I saw your...legs...”

My legs? “Wait, what? When did you see my legs? Other than just now, I mean.”

“You showed them to me yourself.”

“I would never do something so perverted!”

“You did, back when you tried to make it seem like we’d done something!”

Back when I’d tried to *what*, now? Wait... “You mean when Leticia was trying to escape?”

“Yes.”

Quite some time ago now, back when Leticia—still the prince’s fiancée at the time—had run away to a quiet village, I’d joined Nadir in following her there. She’d told me her brother was available, and I’d thought that was very convenient, so I’d tried to make people think we’d done the deed. Which, well, yes. I’d never planned on going all the way, though, and regardless—

“Hey!” I protested. “That only happened because *you* shoved me off you and made my skirt flip up! I wasn’t *showing* you anything!”

“The fact you were on top of me in the first place is enough for me to label you perverted!”

“How rude! I wasn’t going to compromise my chastity!” But come to think of it, ever since that day, Nadir had seemed much more wistful. “B-

Besides, you were indifferent to my advances."

If he'd remembered our time together as children, why hadn't he greeted me with open arms and an "I've missed you!" when I went to visit him? Instead, he'd snapped at me to go home and kicked me out!

"That's because you came after me before I was ready," Nadir explained.

"Ready for what?" I tilted my head, puzzled. Why would he have needed to be ready to pursue a friendship with me?

He gave me an exasperated sigh. "I had to investigate your family situation and the people you owed money to, and ensure there were no issues with your social circles, among other things."

Wait, did high-ranking nobles always go so far as to probe into even minor acquaintanceships? My goodness! How terrifyingly strict!

"Once I confirmed I could handle the debt and that there were no other issues, I came for you," Nadir said.

"You called me over, actually," I corrected him. He'd made me come for him, not the other way around.

"Tomayto, tomahto."

"Also, how could you tell who I was by looking at my legs? Surely I've changed after all these years?"

"Some parts of you haven't."

"I'm pretty sure I've changed plenty."

"You have, and that's why I couldn't recognize you at first," he agreed. "A tomboyish child like you, who barely even looked like a girl, growing such giant melons? I never would've guessed."

"Excuse you!" Listen, I hadn't exactly thought I'd have ended up looking like this either! I'd hoped to become a dainty beauty!

"But one thing didn't change."

"And that was...?" I looked at Nadir expectantly. Maybe he was about to be nice—perhaps he'd say it was something about my personality.

He looked straight at me as he answered, "The three moles lined up on your thigh."

"You jerk!"

***

“And here I’d been hoping you’d say, like, ‘It took but one glance to recognize you,’ but nooo...”

Overcome with shock, I sank into the bed as Nadir stroked my back.

“You can’t seriously think something that unrealistic would happen,” he said, his words harsh despite his comforting touch. “If things were always that convenient, every story in the world would have a happy ending.”

“Oh, let a girl dream,” I protested.

“Girls are a pain,” he remarked.

“You know, this is why nobody likes you.”

“I see,” he said, still stroking my back. For all his faults, I really appreciated this caring side of his. “Also, Ms. Dreaming Girl, I have good news for you.”

“Good news?”

“I’m now close to a prince.” Nadir’s chest puffed up proudly.

“Oh,” I replied half-heartedly.

Displeased with my listless reaction, he repeated, “I’m now close to a prince.”

“Um, right.”

“Unfortunately, this kingdom practices hereditary succession. While it’s not impossible to overthrow the royal family, the risk of failure is high. The people are quite content with our monarchs at the moment, and so a coup would likely be met with backlash.”

What unsettling words. It was true: there was very little dissatisfaction among the people toward the royal family. A coup under these circumstances would surely be an unpopular choice. Did he mean he’d have tried to overthrow them if the people had been unhappy? Had he thought about becoming king?

This man is terrifying, I thought to myself, shivering.

He just continued to rub my back. “So I decided to take an easier path toward affiliation with the royal family. If Leticia bears a child by the crown prince, that child will be the future monarch, and I’ll be said monarch’s uncle.”

“Um, right.”

Being that close to the royal family would indeed bring him significant influence. But why was he so fixated on being “close to a prince,” I wondered...? A certain past event surfaced in my mind. That couldn’t be

it...could it? “Is this because I told you I wanted to marry a prince?”

He said nothing in response.

“I-I’m taking your silence as a yes!”

“If you want,” he mumbled after a pause. So that *had* been a yes!

No way. Was his entire obsession with power all due to something a girl had said? A girl he’d only met once, twelve years ago?! In other words...

“Y-You were in love with me back then?”

He said nothing in response.

“I-I’m taking your silence as a yes!”

“That’s not it,” he said. Oh. So this time it’d been a no. My disappointment had me on the verge of tears, for some reason.

No, not “for some reason.” I knew why. Deep down, I’d wanted him to say yes. I’d still been hoping for a happy ending to my story.

“There’s no ‘back then.’” Nadir brushed away the tears that had begun to form. “I still love you now,” he said with certainty, looking at me with an anxious expression. A rare moment of vulnerability from someone usually so levelheaded.

He’d...confessed his love for me? Really?

For a moment, I thought I must be dreaming. The warmth of his hands at the corners of my eyes, however, assured me that this was reality.

“I—” I choked on my words, my voice a high-pitched mess. “I’m so deeply in debt.”

“I’ve already paid it off,” he said.

“M-My home is nothing special...”

“I’ve told you before that my family values love above all.”

“I-I’m not cute...”

“You are to me.”

Was he all right? He’d never said anything like this in all the time I’d known him.

“Y-You think I’m cute?” The words spilled out of my mouth before I could stop them.

“I do,” he answered gently.

Ah. Truly, what a fool I’d been.

“I-I love you too,” I said. Of course I did. How could I not be moved by this?

Nadir smiled joyfully.

***

“Okay, but why? What’s so good about my brother?” my friend—and my fiancée’s younger sister—asked the moment she entered the dressing room.

“You’re asking me that on the day of the wedding?” I said.

“I mean, I just don’t get what’s *sooo* great about him,” said a clearly irritated Leticia as she bit down on her handkerchief, seemingly displeased with how things had played out. “Brie, you were a live-in maid for my brother, right? He was totally, *totally* trying to win you over! I mean, you know? I bet he made you help him get changed and help him with bathing and stuff!”

“I did *not* help him with bathing!”

“So you *did* help him get changed!”

Crap. Baited.

“I always did think it was odd how my self-serving brother never got engaged, despite arranging political marriages for *other* people. You know. For *other people*.”

Wow. She was never going to let that go, was she? She’d even repeated it.

The heavy door of the dressing room swung open. And who else would it have been at a time like this? It was the other star of the day—the groom.

“We’re marrying for love,” Nadir said. “What’s the fuss?”

“You know, people say that it’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the ceremony,” Leticia said. “Makes her want to run away.”

“Don’t make up weird superstitions.” Nadir looked different today, more put-together than usual in his white tuxedo, with his hair styled. Which, of course. It *was* his big day today. “To be clear, I supported your match with the prince because you liked him.”

“Yeah, but it went from great to awful really quickly!”

“That’s because our father spoiled you so much you couldn’t do anything! You’d never have been able to keep an engagement like that.”

“I could definitely do things! I could climb trees!”

“And how many tree-climbing princesses have you heard of?!”

“One! Standing right here!”

They really were close in their own way, weren’t they?

“As for making her work as a maid,” Nadir continued, “it wasn’t only for that reason. I wanted her to understand the inner workings of our household so she wouldn’t struggle as lady of the house.”

“And you couldn’t show your own sister that kindness *why*, exactly? Also, ‘that reason’ was *so* obviously to win her over.”

“Why wouldn’t I treat the woman I’m in love with differently from my sister?”

“Ugh! Augh! I don’t wanna hear *you* of all people be mushy! I’m leaving! Bye, Brie! See you later!”

With that, Leticia stormed out. The woman was a veritable whirlwind. And then, when she was out in public, she’d just switch into “elegant crown princess” mode. It was astonishing, truly.

Siblings through and through, I thought to myself as I stood up from my chair. “So you’re in love with me?”

“Have been for the longest time.” How casually he said it took me aback. I blushed furiously, and he laughed, looking thoroughly entertained by my embarrassment.

“I wonder if I’ll be of any use as a duchess.”

“You don’t have to be of use. But...I would appreciate it if you used the knowledge you’ve acquired as heiress to a barony on our path together in life.”

“You got it!” Mutual support could only make a relationship better.

A knock on the door. It was time.

“Shall we, my bride?” Nadir asked, extending a hand.

“Let’s go, my groom,” I replied as I took it.

Together, we stepped forward.

Despite having fallen so deeply in debt, despite all my myriad challenges, I had no regrets. My life, with all its ups and downs, was a blissful one.

With him by my side.

Side Story: In-Law Surprise

“Here I am!”

“You don’t have to be,” I said, reflexively trying to close the door as Leticia wedged her foot in. “Also, you’re the crown princess. You shouldn’t be so casual when announcing yourself.”

“Why? I grew up here!”

Well. Yes. True.

Reluctantly, I opened the door for her. Leticia chuckled and said, “Thanks. Sneaking out was really hard. I’m beat.”

“You sneaked out *again*?”

Ah, yes. There was Leticia, sprawled out on the couch like she owned the place. Indeed, this was the same woman who had done exactly that not so long ago. The crown princess. My husband’s little sister. A bit of a loose cannon who slipped out of the palace on occasion, yet still performed her duties admirably and presented herself well in public. Around those she trusted, however, she was very much herself.

“Surely you didn’t climb a tree to jump over the wall again, right?” I asked.

“No, not today,” she said. “I lassoed the wall and climbed over it that way.”

What sort of crown princess behaved like this?! Oh. Right. This one. I could only imagine the hardships her guards must’ve faced, trying to keep up with her ever-evolving escape tactics day in, day out.

“At least send word in advance, Leticia,” said Nadir, who sat opposite her and next to me. He was quite used to her antics by now.

“Send word, you say,” she mused. “I’d love to try, like, a smoke signal. Think that’d work?”

“Obviously not!”

There was no way we’d have understood a smoke signal.

“Damn,” she mumbled. “What about a cipher?”

“How about you send a message like a normal, sane person?” Nadir

snapped. “You’re going to fry Ben’s brain.”

Indeed, I recalled one such time, when Leticia had sent us a blank letter. It had sent Ben into a tizzy. As it turned out, the paper had needed to be heated for the writing to appear. I wished she’d stop doing such things.

I nodded in agreement with Nadir, and Leticia pouted in disappointment.

“So, what do you want today?” I asked, certain that it was something trivial. Leticia hesitated, rubbing her palms together.

“Uh, so, I might’ve, you know, upset someone,” she stammered. “Maybe.”

“Meaning you did something wrong,” said Nadir. I quickly nodded in agreement. “Go apologize.”

“Wow, you guys are so mean,” Leticia whined. “Making assumptions like this...”

“It’s true, though, isn’t it?” I asked.

The princess hung her head. “Um, so, my handmaiden, right, Maria? I had her, you know, swap outfits with me. Just for, like, fun.”

What were you thinking? I wanted to interject, but I stayed quiet and listened patiently.

“I got a *little* carried away, you see, and I helped with some of her duties,” Leticia continued. “And apparently, well, that was a problem.”

Seriously, what *had* she been thinking?

“And then I, um, got a bit too friendly with the soldiers, and now Lord Clarke is mad at me, and, um, can I hide here?” she said, trying to persuade us with a sheepish little chuckle.

“So, uh, about that...”

Nadir and I both looked behind Leticia, and the color quickly drained from her cheeks.

“Lettie,” came a familiar, low voice, causing Leticia to jump and turn around in a jarring motion, like a rusty tin puppet. “I never said you could casually hold hands with a soldier.”

“I, um, I just wanted to have a look at his sword,” she explained shakily. “I didn’t mean to touch hands...”

Prince Clarke scooped the fearful, white-as-a-sheet Leticia into his arms, and she let out a high-pitched squeak. “Thank you for looking after her,” he said.

I felt bad for her, but she’d dug her own grave here. We couldn’t help

her.

Nadir and I nodded at each other as we watched the two leave. “That girl’s like a summer storm,” I mused.

“She is,” he concurred. “I do wish she’d stop trying to use our home as a refuge, though.”

We both scoffed lightly and returned to sipping our tea, which was now cold. Oh, the humanity.

“While on the topic,” Nadir said, looking over at me. “I don’t like it when other men touch you either. Even Ben.”

Right. Come to think of it, he’d reprimanded me for shaking hands with the butler. And Nadir, unlike the prince, didn’t openly show his displeasure, so even if I’d accidentally touched a man’s hand, he wouldn’t have chased me down like that. But he *had* reflexively forced our hands apart.

So that had been a sign of possessiveness! I hadn’t noticed at the time, but thinking about it now, I was quite pleased to realize I’d been on his mind the whole time.

“Noted,” I replied with a smile. Content, Nadir returned it with a smile of his own.

Still, I did wish he’d show a *bit* more jealousy.

Side Story: Nadir’s First Love

“Father!”

I entered my father’s office, a stack of papers in my hands, only to find him leisurely reading a book.

“Why the hurry, Nadir?” he said. “What is it?”

“These!” I snapped, slamming the documents onto his desk.

My father picked them up and gave them a once-over. Confused, he tilted his head. “And what’s the matter with them?”

“What do you *mean*, ‘what’s the matter’?! Are you blind?!” I yelled, snatching the papers from his hands. “The total amount, right here! It’s impossible! There’s a mistake in the numbers! How can you not notice?!”

“Huh, is there? Hmm,” he replied, going over the documents a second time. “I’m bad with difficult stuff like this, so I tend to leave it to my employees.”

“And that’s the issue!” I said, snatching up the papers yet again and pointing at the incorrect figures. “Listen! We don’t need this many funds. We’ll definitely end up with a surplus. And where, pray tell, do you think the extra money will end up?”

“Umm... Maybe it’ll be kept somewhere for a rainy day?”

“The employee who did this will embezzle it!”

My father looked at me in shock and gasped. I wanted to slap him. “Fraud like this happens because you sign off on things blindly! I’ve turned him over to the guards. Now listen! You need to be more attentive!” I insisted.

“But...” he replied, his face stiffening in distress. “Isn’t that too harsh? I feel bad for him.”

“That’s not what you should be feeling bad for!” I snapped, resisting the urge to strike him and thrusting the documents in his face instead. “Obviously he should be punished for embezzlement! It’s wrong! A crime! Stop feeling sorry for a criminal!”

“B-But...” My father’s eyebrows furrowed with concern. “He has young

children. We could be a little lenient—”

Noticing my expression, he stopped midsentence, but it was far too late.

My shouts were the loudest they’d been all day.

***

Damn it! Damn this! Ugh!

Enraged, I stormed out of the estate.

“Why must my own father be so stupid?!”

It was because of him that I was saddled with these unnecessary burdens. I was only ten years old, yet I already carried the house’s weight on my shoulders.

My father was an only child, and so he’d been spoiled rotten growing up. All he’d had to do was smile and everyone would fawn all over him. Now he’d grown up into a clueless, kindhearted moron. As for my mother, she’d grown up a sheltered noblewoman, raised to marry, bear children, and stand by her husband at all times. She was completely useless where work was concerned.

Things had been better when my grandfather was alive. He might have been a failure at raising a child, but he’d been competent at his other duties.

“If I hadn’t learned so much from grandfather, our house would’ve gone to pieces long ago!”

Long. Ago.

“But nooo, *I’m* the one who’s frightening!” What manner of father burst into tears, saying he was scared of his own son? Mine, apparently! “I’m done with this! Done!” Vexed, I hopped into a carriage, with no destination in mind, and just told the coachman to drive.

I took in the unfamiliar scenery. In stark contrast with my inner turmoil, the weather outside was beautiful. Suddenly, I heard the cheerful shouts of children and, glancing over, I spotted a run-down orphanage.

“Stop here,” I commanded.

“Huh?” the coachman replied.

“I said stop the carriage.”

“Y-Yes, my lord!” Hurriedly, the man did as requested and the carriage came to a stop.

I hopped off. “Wait here until I return,” I said, before beginning to walk

toward the orphanage.

“Y-Yes, my lord.”

To absolutely no one’s surprise given the sad state of the orphanage, the fence was in poor condition, and I easily slipped in at the back. It was only when I was already inside that I calmed down enough to question what in blazes I was doing, but by that point I was too ashamed to simply return to the carriage without doing anything.

Moving away from the orphanage children’s voices, I found myself in some sort of inner courtyard. There, I sat down with a sigh. “Seriously, what *am* I doing?”

The joyful, carefree cries of the children had drawn me to this place, but simply striding in through the front would have been out of the question. So here I was, sneaking around. What was wrong with me?

I breathed yet another sigh.

“Hey,” came a sudden voice, making me flinch in surprise.

Hesitantly, I looked in its direction. There stood a child, a little younger than myself. The short hair initially made me think this was a boy, but the skirt gave it away; she was, in fact, a girl.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Where did you come from?”

“It’s none of your business,” I replied.

“I live here, so it’s totally my business,” the girl retorted.

I glared silently at the ground, hoping she’d leave me alone.

“You’re so gloomy,” she said.

“What?” I looked up at her in annoyance.

“Something’s bothering you, right?”

“Why do you think that?”

“You’re a little rich kid in fancy clothes, but you walked into this run-down orphanage. If you were just lost, you’d have asked someone for help and left, right?”

There was nothing I could say to that. This girl had seen right through me, but I didn’t want to admit to anything. As my silence dragged on, more children began to gather around us. Ugh.

“Hey Anna, who’s that?” one asked.

“Hmm. He’s my friend,” she replied.

“What?!” I exclaimed. We’d just met! I wasn’t her friend! How ridiculous!

Seeing my outburst, the girl leaned close and whispered, “If I don’t tell them you’re my friend, you’ll get kicked out of here real quick.”

That *would* have been far from ideal. I fell silent yet again, and the girl took my hand and pulled me to my feet.

“H-Hey!” I protested.

“Look, I dunno what you’re all hung up about,” she said, “but sitting around like a lump won’t help! You should exercise, so you don’t have time to think about stuff! Which is to say...you’re ‘it’!”

“Huh?!”

“Everyone run!”

The girl yelled at me to count to ten, then sprinted away.

“Hey!” I protested again, though no one paid it any mind. I heard her yell at me from afar, once again telling me to count to ten, and so I grudgingly began to do that.

I knew this game—“tag,” they called it. All I had to do was touch someone. I caught up to another child and lightly poked them with my fingertip, but they just looked at me like I’d grown two heads.

The girl, who was standing nearby, laughed loudly. “Have you never played tag before? You need to touch people like this!” she said, and slapped my back with gusto.

“You have to put that much strength into it...?” I asked.

“Yep! Now do it! Tag someone!”

I followed her instructions and tagged the child who had been standing there watching our exchange in befuddlement.

“Now you say ‘you’re it!’ and you run!”

“O-Okay. You’re it,” I said, before running away like she’d said. I heard the girl chuckle behind me, and I couldn’t help cracking a genuine smile—my first in a long, long time.

After a few games, the girl showed me a slide and taught me how to play. “Hey! Watch me, okay?” she shouted down from the top of the slide.

“Okay,” I replied.

She nodded then cheerfully exclaimed, “Here I go!”

The girl glided down the slide with incredible ease. I was impressed. She drew closer and closer—

Wait.

“Eek!” she yelped. “Move, move!”

Too late.

The girl crashed straight into me at the end of the slide, and we both

came tumbling down. Thankfully, the sandbox was below, but it still hurt. Also, she was sitting on top of me, and felt quite heavy.

“Get off...” I began, but before I could say “me,” my voice died in my throat.

Her skirt had flipped.

I saw it.

A bear.

“Oww...” she whined, snapping me back to reality.

“Uh, are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry,” she mumbled—and finally noticed the compromising position she was in. Her face turned beet red, which was quite amusing to watch.

What came next was significantly less amusing.

“S-Stupid!” she yelled, slapping me in the face with a painful *smack*.

***

A damp, cool handkerchief was placed on my swollen, red cheek.

“Sorry! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to!” the girl said, looking like she was about to cry.

“It’s fine,” I assured her. It just stung a bit.

“Of all the days to wear a skirt,” she grumbled. According to her, she seldom wore skirts, so she’d completely forgotten about what she was wearing. I made a mental note to myself that she usually wore pants.

“Mama always says I should only ever show my underwear to the man I’m gonna marry,” she murmured, her eyes glistening with tears. “Now I can’t get married anymore...”

“It was an accident. These things happen.”

“Okay...” she said, though her eyes were still misty.

“Say...” I began.

“Huh?”

“I’ll just marry you myself, then,” I said in earnest.

She stared blankly at me for a moment before chuckling and wiping at the corners of her eyes. “Thanks!”

Her smile made my heart flutter. I averted my gaze.

“That was fun!” she exclaimed cheerfully.

It was already evening, so she probably knew I had to go. “U-Um,” I began, looking down and feeling oddly anxious.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Thanks for today,” I said softly. “I feel better.”

She beamed at me. “You’re welcome!”

“Uhm,” I mumbled. She looked adorable, and my cheeks flushed.

“Hmm?”

“Do you...like anyone...?”

“Like anyone?” she echoed, pondering for a moment before suddenly looking up. “A prince!”

“A prince?”

“Yeah! Like, from a story! They’re so cool! They’re rich and live in huge castles, and they’re handsome! So if I was gonna marry, I’d want it to be to a prince!”

My cheerful mood took a nosedive.

“There’s no way you can marry a prince,” I told her.

“I totally can!” she protested, puffing up her cheeks. “One’s totally gonna come for me!”

“No way. A prince would never choose a commoner.”

“They marry village girls in the stories!”

“It cannot happen!”

“Yes it can!”

“It can’t!”

“It can!”

We went on arguing for a while until we were both out of breath, glaring at one another.

I broke eye contact first and said, “I’ll come for you.”

“What?” she asked, tilting her head in confusion at my bold declaration.

“I’m not a prince, but I’ll be close to one,” I told her. “Wait for me.”

Just you wait.

With that, I ran back to my carriage, my cheeks still burning bright red. The coachman was clearly surprised by my blush, but said nothing, and the carriage left.

Just watch. I’ll make her my wife.

With this new goal in mind, I made my way back home.

***

As soon as I got home, I was greeted by a small mountain of incorrect documents to occupy my mind with. My father had prepared them for me, seemingly wanting to lift my spirits.

It would be some time before I learned that the girl had been adopted and taken elsewhere.

Side Story: Telling His Parents

“M-M-M-M-M-Marriage?!”

Shortly after Nadir and I became bona fide lovers, he’d made arrangements for us to meet with his parents. And upon being told of our impending marriage, his father, Duke Curtis of House Dorman, was astonished.

Incidentally, his parents didn’t live in the main Dorman residence in the capital. They were retired, Nadir had told me, and so they lived in another estate, about two days away by carriage.

“Oh my,” said his mother Shelly, her serenity a stark contrast to her husband’s panic.

Curtis looked me straight in the eye and yelled, “Are you out of your mind?!”

“What do you mean, father?” Nadir asked.

“Eep!” The duke’s dignity evaporated immediately. He recoiled, intimidated by his own son. “I-I mean, this is no minor thing! Are you being threatened? Blackmailed?!”

“Father?”

“I-I mean...” Curtis mumbled, tearing up as he hid behind his wife. He looked like a small, frightened animal.

I gave Nadir a soft tap on the back to calm him down, and got him to take a step away. Clearing my throat, I gave his parents a serious look and said, “Um, there are no threats or blackmail involved, I assure you. I genuinely adore your son.”

Shelly nodded in acknowledgment, but Curtis still looked at me like he couldn’t believe his ears. “Truly?” he asked. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

“Stop pestering her, father,” Nadir interjected, glaring at the duke.

“Urk...” Curtis, now on the verge of tears, hid behind his wife again.

“I apologize for my husband, Brianna,” said the duchess.

“Oh, it’s fine,” I assured her.

“You see, he’s frightened because Nadir’s always scolding him for something or another, but truly, it’s his own fault.”

“Sh-Shelly...” Curtis whined, giving his wife a resentful look.

She tilted her head. “Did I say something wrong?”

“N-No... You...didn’t...” he mumbled, deflating now that his wife too was chastising him.

I found myself wondering if a man this meek had any business being the head of a household.

“You see, because of the way my husband is,” Shelly explained, “Nadir’s had to handle all of the duchy’s affairs from a young age.” The duchess exhaled softly. She looked too youthful to be a mother of two. “Oh my! I never offered you a seat! Please, sit.”

“Thank you, Lady Shelly,” I said.

At her urging, we sat down for tea. Shelly took a seat as well, and Curtis reluctantly took his next to her, clearly still intimidated by Nadir, who sat beside me.

The moment had been tense, and I was grateful for the reprieve.

Smiling warmly at me, the duchess continued speaking. “I wish I could’ve been of help, but unfortunately, I have neither the knowledge nor the talent. I tried to excel at socializing, at least, but...I don’t think I was very successful at even that much,” she said, her eyes slightly moist as she recalled the past.

Curtis seemed uncomfortable. “Yes, I believe I’m at fault as well,” he mused. “I was born when my parents were already getting on in years, and they spoiled me rotten. So when I came of age, I was completely useless. I’ve caused nothing but problems for Nadir...”

“Indeed,” Nadir agreed. “Nothing but problems.”

Curtis looked down, stifling a sob.

“I worried that Nadir had become too calculating, too uncaring of others, but...” Shelly wiped at her tears with her beautiful, slender fingers. “He found himself a bride! Oh, what joy!” The duchess beamed so brightly all of a sudden that it was a bit startling. Unable to contain her joy, she leaned closer to me, and said, “Don’t worry. We won’t be living at the main estate, so by all means, think of us as distant figures. Although it would be quite lovely if you could visit sometimes...”

“I may not be able to visit very often, but I’ll make an effort to come by

on occasion," I told her.

"Oh, that's wonderful news!" she exclaimed, the sparkle in her eyes making me smile in spite of myself. "Ah, of course, the wedding! Have you decided on a dress? If you'd like, I could help with a tailor—"

"I'll be handling all of that from start to finish," Nadir cut in.

Shelly stared blankly at him for a moment, then chuckled. "Oh dear, possessive, aren't you? You've always kept people at arm's length, but now that you've found someone you love, it's quite something!"

"Mother," Nadir said, his cheeks a soft shade of pink.

"Oh, pardon me," she said, not looking contrite in the slightest. Perhaps she'd hit the nail on the head?

Come to think of it, Nadir had been handpicking all my outfits for some time now. Had that been a sign of possessiveness too? Huh...

A little embarrassed by the thought, I looked down. Shelly laughed softly. "How delightful," she said, gently taking my hand in hers. "Brianna?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Nadir may be a bit difficult to understand, but he's a good man at heart. Do try to get along with him, hmm?"

I smiled back at her. "Yes, of course. I love even the awkward side of him."

Shelly's smile widened, and she looked relieved. "It sounds like Nadir has everything under control, but if there's anything you need from us, be it for the ceremony or otherwise, by all means, do let us know. You two will be sharing a life together, after all."

"I will."

"And should you two ever argue, please feel free to come to me. I know it may be difficult to go to your mother-in-law for advice, but I married into this family too. I'm on your side."

"Of course, Lady Shelly. I will," I repeated with a nod.

Shelly suddenly closed her mouth as if she'd just realized something. "Oh my, one does tend to talk overmuch as they get older. Apologies for being a nag."

"Oh, not at all!" I understood both her love for Nadir and her concern for me. I was genuinely happy that she felt that way. Surely this was what it meant to truly join your spouse's family.

“Right! I almost forgot. Please just call me Shelly,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Oh, is that too soon?” she asked, looking at me with innocent eyes.

I shook my head. “N-No, of course not, um, Shelly,” I said a bit sheepishly.

The duchess covered her mouth as if moved by the display of familiarity. “Oh, how lovely! Could you say it one more time?”

“Shelly.”

“How lucky I am that my daughter-in-law is so willing to drop formalities around me,” she said dreamily. “You see, Nadir was always a very independent child, and always treated us very impersonally, calling us father and mother from a young age. He’d only ever call us mom and dad in front of Leticia, as if to teach her that was what she was supposed to do.” She paused, seemingly realizing something, and looked down, disheartened. “Come to think of it, even Leticia’s upbringing was largely left to Nadir. Oh, what sad parents we were...”

“Um, but Nadir doesn’t seem to have a bad relationship with Leticia,” I said. “I think he likely didn’t really mind.”

“I wonder,” she murmured, lifting her head but still seeming a bit anxious. “I hope so.”

“I’m sure of it,” I assured her.

Shelly smiled warmly at my words and took a sip of her tea. “Please, do be happy with him. You’ve been through quite a bit yourself, haven’t you?”

“You’ve heard?” I asked, surprised that she knew.

Shelly laughed at my lack of awareness, like a child who’d just successfully pulled off a prank. “I told you I’m good at socializing.”

What a formidable social network she had. Thinking about whether I had what it took to survive in high society made me uneasy.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Socializing isn’t that frightening. You’ll get used to it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Besides, Nadir will likely always be right beside you. You have nothing to worry about.”

“That’s true...”

Nadir would have my back, of course. But I wanted to have his too, if I could. I resolved to absorb as much knowledge as possible from now on so

that I'd become someone he could lean on.

Sherry seemed to understand my resolve; she smiled at me for a moment before her gaze drifted sideways. "And I'd appreciate it if you could occasionally spend some time with a certain someone who's busy arguing with Nadir over there."

I looked to the side as she spoke, and saw Curtis with his head between Nadir's palms.

"Drop this already, father," Nadir said.

"But I mean, what if she doesn't *really* want this?" his father asked. "The poor girl!"

"Poor girl? Poor *me* for having a father who thinks I'm the sort of man who'd do something like that."

"Well, I mean...think about it, right? What would you have done if Brianna hadn't reciprocated? You'd have locked her up somewhere, wouldn't you?"

"..."

"There! See?! I was right! You— Ow! Ow ow ow ow! Don't squeeze me so hard!"

Ah, what fun they seemed to be having, horsing around.

Shelly turned her gaze back to me. "I wouldn't say they get along swimmingly, but it's not so bad," she mused. "My husband is simply a tad insensitive and a tad incompetent, is all."

"My wife is bad-mouthing me!"

"It's not bad-mouthing when it's true, father," Nadir said mercilessly.

Shelly and I exchanged glances and chuckled.

I hoped to spend the rest of my days peacefully like this. And with Nadir by my side, I was certain my wish would come true.

Joy swelling in my heart, I smiled once more.

Side Story: How Ben Became a Butler

“She’s no longer here?” I asked, my voice coming out weaker than intended.

The matron gave me an apologetic look. “Yes, she was adopted a little while ago. I’m sorry.”

An overwhelming feeling of helplessness washed over me. I’d finally managed to handle all of my backlogged work to come to the orphanage for Anna, only to find out she’d already been adopted.

My brain froze for a moment from the shock, but I quickly shook my head and turned back to the matron. “And who adopted her?”

“Well, you see, um,” the woman stammered, “I simply do what the owner of this orphanage asks of me. I don’t have access to the specifics...”

“‘The owner’ being who, exactly?”

“See, a few years ago, the lord of this region passed away, and a relative took over,” the matron said with a troubled frown. “And...well, the new owner isn’t particularly interested in the orphanage. I’ve tried asking about previously adopted children before, but...”

Apparently, this new owner rarely involved themselves with orphanage affairs, only ever responding with “don’t worry about it” when asked about the children’s new homes—and even that took several attempts at contact.

I had no option but to attempt to reach out to this person, however.

“Very well,” I said. “Sorry to have bothered you.”

“Oh, not at all,” the matron replied. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of any help.”

Though I was only a child, she kept a dignified posture when speaking to me. That left me with a favorable impression of her; she must’ve been treating the other children here with sincerity too. Perhaps that was why Anna, despite being an orphan, had been raised so well.

“Mama!” exclaimed a small child with snot dripping from his nose as he jumped onto the matron’s lap. “I wanna play!”

“Now, now,” she told the boy, taking a tissue from her pocket to wipe at

the child's face. "Your nose's runny again. What did I say about coming out to play before blowing your nose?"

"But this stuff just keeps coming out!" the boy whined, though he let her clean his nose. "My nose gets sore!"

I remembered this child. "Ben, was it?" I asked. He'd been playing with Anna during my previous visit, and had stuck out to me because she'd called him "Snot-nosed Ben." Seemed his nose was still as runny as ever.

At my words, Ben let go of the matron and turned to face me. "Oh! You're the guy from the other day!" So he remembered me. He grabbed onto my arm with a bright smile. "Did you come to play today too? C'mon! Play with me!" he pleaded, pulling at me.

"Ben!" the director said firmly. "You can't just pull people's arms like that!"

The boy whimpered. "I'm sorry..."

I felt bad seeing him deflate like that, but I had indeed not come to play today, and I was in a hurry to find out where Anna had gone. "Sorry. I'm here for Anna..."

"For Anna?" Ben asked, tilting his head. "Did you know? She loves chocolate!"

"What?" The unprompted information caught me off guard.

Perhaps thinking he'd piqued my interest, Ben continued excitedly, "And, um, she loves counting money! And, uh, she runs real fast! Like, the fastest! And she likes pants because they're comfy but she actually really loves cute stuff!"

Satisfied with all the information about Anna he'd rattled off, the boy put his hands on his hips proudly.

"I-I apologize," the matron said, presumably trying to cover up for him. "This boy was close friends with Anna, so he must be lonely without her." She patted Ben's head as his nose began to run again.

I took a look at the boy, then made a decision.

"I'll take him."

***

"...And that's how I ended up taking Ben in," Nadir explained, stealing a glance at Ben, who broke out in a cold sweat. "He didn't have any more

information than that.”

Ben cowered in fear of Nadir’s glare. “I-I mean, I taught you some other stuff,” he stammered. “Like her shoe size...”

“And what’s the use of knowing a child’s shoe size?” Nadir retorted. “They grow quickly.”

Fair point. Ben shrank further.

“I regret picking up a useless boy who can’t even learn how to do his job,” Nadir said.

“Th-That’s not very nice!” Ben protested. Still, if information was the sole reason Nadir had taken him in, the butler really would’ve been useless.

“You kept looking after him anyway, though,” I mused, unable to help a smile.

Nadir furrowed his brows in discomfort. “I *did* take him in.”

“Oh, Young Master!” a touched Ben exclaimed, wrapping his arms around Nadir. “Please, take care of me forever!”

“For crying out loud!” Nadir exclaimed. “Learn to take care of yourself!”

“That won’t happen! I can’t even tell when I’m feeling sick!”

“You abject moron!”

I took a bite of my chocolate cake as I watched the two of them mess around. I *had* been wondering why this house always had so many chocolate treats... But I did like them, so I kept that thought to myself. “I can’t believe you took Ben in just to learn more about me,” I said, taking another nibble.

“It’s not like I could find you either way,” Nadir replied with a sigh. “The owner was careless and kept no records. Well, I did end up leveraging that to basically take over the orphanage for free, so there was that.” How very like him to exploit a weakness when he saw it. “And Anna wasn’t even your real name, now, was it?”

My cheek twitched slightly at the annoyed look he gave me. “W-Well, it’s not like children care much about what they’re called, so they gave us simple names at the orphanage. Besides, when a child gets adopted, their parents give them a proper, officially registered name, so...”

That was why Nadir had been unable to find me. Sloppy management meant there’d been almost no information in the first place, and the name he had for me—his only clue—turned out to not even be my real one.

“I-I’m sorry,” I felt the urge to say.

Nadir shook his head, as if to imply there was nothing that could’ve been done. It’d been neither my fault nor Ben’s—simply bad timing all around.

To clear the awkward atmosphere, I decided to ask a question that had been gnawing at me. “Why did you take over the orphanage, though? It’s not even in your jurisdiction...” Not that I minded. As someone who’d come from there, I wouldn’t have wanted it to remain under lousy management either.

Nadir flushed red at my inquiry. “I figured there was a chance you’d come by to visit...”

I couldn’t help but blush too, seeing his embarrassment. “W-Wait... You did it for me, even knowing I might never return?”

“Is that so bad?” he mumbled, unable to hold his gaze and turning his face away. Which was adorable, by the way. I was a simple woman, with simple tastes.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Sure,” he murmured, still looking away.

Nadir really was cute when we were together. I moved closer to him, smiled, and pulled him into a hug. He stiffened at first, but slowly coiled his arms around my back too.

For now, I just wanted to bask in this warm feeling. And so I pretended not to hear Ben whine, “What about me...?”

Afterword

Hello, readers old and new! My name's Izumi Sawano.

Thank you for picking up a copy of *I May Be on the Verge of Ruin, but I Want to Get Married*! This book acts as a sequel to *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons* and features Brianna, the money-loving friend of the main character Leticia from the previous story. Though she was probably the most popular side character from that book, even I was surprised that she ended up as the sequel's protagonist.

I wrote *I May Be on the Verge of Ruin, but I Want to Get Married* so that even those who haven't read the first book could follow the story. What did you guys think? Hopefully new readers weren't confused, and old readers enjoyed seeing familiar faces pop up here and there.

The *Princess Lessons* series is meant to be a simple rom-com, so I once again avoided complicated settings and went for a basic and peaceful plot. Honestly, I'd already been planning on writing Brianna and Nadir's love story back when I was writing *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons*. The plan had always been to pair them up, so I was very glad to finally commit it to paper in a sequel.

Brianna's focus may be money due to the debt her family's in, but she's an innocent maiden at her core, one who still feels like a commoner at heart. She's probably more of a heroine than the previous protagonist, Leticia!

As for Nadir, he's a perfectionist with a smattering of issues here and there. And it's because of this perfectionism that it takes him a while to accept Brianna. He only calls her over to his home when he's absolutely certain that it's safe to—which sounds kind of bad on paper, I know. But I do think that while there's a time and place for idealized men, having a more humanized, flawed hero can be good too.

Since Brianna isn't a very typical noblewoman, I was anxious to even include her in *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons*, but it turned out people really liked her character despite her business-minded nature. What

a relief. We love to see a young lady who isn't afraid to focus on pecuniary pursuits!

I'd originally challenged myself to have Abel act as a romantic rival, but as usual I tend to go for a fixed pairing, which would've made me feel bad for whoever was left out, so he ended up as just a good friend. So much for my challenge—I just like fluff.

Ben was introduced as a key character, but I went overboard with the silliness surrounding him and he ended up being mostly useless. As an author, though, I like him. Silly is good too.

Compared to the prequel's main character, Brianna's more of a maiden at heart, so I think she was a better fit for a love story. I also had a lot of fun adding more romantic scenes. I'm not used to them, so they were a little embarrassing to write, but I look back on the experience fondly.

I was shocked when the opportunity for a sequel came up. *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons* had wrapped up neatly in a single volume, so I never expected it! And I was even more surprised when I heard about the manga adaptation. I thought my eyeballs would fly out of their sockets, seriously. Next I knew I was googling what the adaptation would entail.

As it turns out, I wasn't just having a wonderful dream, and so the day came when both the sequel and the manga version were released.

The manga was drawn by Uri Sugata-sensei, who added her own twists to it. It turned out very lovely! The character designs are a little different too, so if you've read *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons*, I'd be stoked if you compared and contrasted the two to see the differences!

Once again, just like in the prequel, Miru Yumesaki-sensei handled the illustrations for this book. Her work is very delicate and makes the characters come alive, which brings a tear to my eye. The thought that our collaboration would be over with the previous book made me sad, so I was thrilled that we got to work together again. I really can't thank her enough for making my story into something so wonderful.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all those who have worked hard on the publication of this book. Thank you all so much!

To those of you who chose *I May Be on the Verge of Ruin, but I Want to Get Married* out of the countless books available out there: thank you so, so much.

Izumi Sawano
March 2020

"You can't get dressed yourself?" I asked.
"Are you a child?"
"Trying to make me angry so you can escape this won't work," he said flatly.
"Hurry and dress me."

Bonus Short Story

Group Cooking!

“I figured I’d pay you a visit!” Abel, Nadir’s self-proclaimed friend, said cheerily as he arrived at our home.

“You seem quite lively for this early in the morning,” I remarked.

“Thanks to you! Being healthy is my specialty!” he said with a toothy grin. Abel sure seemed to be in high spirits.

Unlike Nadir, who looked groggy. “Bit early for a visit, no?”

“It’s already seven!” Abel protested. “You’re usually up and about at this hour.”

“Not on my days off,” Nadir groused.

“And I’m here *because* it’s a day off!”

Well, yes. He wouldn’t have come if he didn’t think we were home, and it stood to reason he expected us to be, given it was Nadir’s day off. Abel put a hand on his still-sleepy, friend-not-friend’s shoulder. “See, last time I invited Lady Brianna to a meal, it ended up being a feast at your home. So I figured I’d try again.”

“There was absolutely no reason to try again,” said Nadir.

“Aw, come on. Don’t say that. I brought ingredients and everything!”

Wait, ingredients? Hadn’t his excuse been that he’d wanted to try again because we’d ended up eating here last time? Wouldn’t this just be more of the same?

Abel must’ve noticed my doubts, because he turned to me and winked. “We won’t be eating here, of course.”

A now slightly-more-awake Nadir tried to brush Abel’s hand off of his shoulder, but his so-called friend held firm. “Let’s go on a picnic!” Abel suggested, smiling brightly as he looked at Nadir and me. “We can all make the food together!”

***

And now Abel, Nadir and I were all standing in the kitchen, sporting aprons.

“This will be my first ever picnic,” Abel said. “I heard from the crown princess that commoners usually bring homemade food and treats to picnics.”

“Oh,” I replied halfheartedly, a bit put off by Abel’s overwhelming enthusiasm.

He hurriedly added, “Ah, but I’m not looking down on you for being a commoner, Lady Brianna! I just thought it might perhaps be a nostalgic experience for you!”

“I get it,” I said. Abel sighed in relief at my response.

“And why am *I* here?” Nadir, now fully awake and still in his own apron, asked as he glared at Abel. “If you want food for the picnic you can just ask the servants to make it.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk! You know nothing, Nadir,” his probably-not-friend said, dramatically pointing a finger at him. “Making the food together before we go on the picnic will be a bonding experience!”

“And did Leticia tell you that?”

“Yes, she did!”

Nadir let out a deep sigh. I understood how he felt—Leticia had probably gotten a kick out of filling Abel’s mind with nonsense just to mess with us. Next time I went to the castle, I was going to eat *all* her desserts. That’d show her.

“Umm...” A voice came from behind us as I plotted my revenge. “Can I come too?” asked Ben, looking sad and forlorn.

“Oh.” Abel averted his eyes. Nadir and I did too.

“Why am I the only one being left out?!” Ben whined, about to cry.

Awkwardly, I scratched my cheek. “I mean, well, you know...”

Abel, Nadir, and I all exchanged glances and said in unison, “We don’t want you to mess it up.”

“You guys are mean!” Ben really did start crying, making the three of us sigh in unison.

Well, what else could we have said? This was the butler who, in an attempt to bake bread, had somehow blown up the oven. Like, what the hell had he put in there?!

“Anyway, Ben aside,” I said, ignoring the weeping butler and turning

back to Abel and Nadir, “what are we making? Have you guys decided already?”

“We have an idea,” Abel said with a wide grin. “We’re making roast beef!”

“No way!” I responded immediately.

Abel let out a disappointed whine. “Why? Roast beef is delicious!”

“Yes, that it is,” I replied. “I’m a fan too. But see! You see! Roast beef takes a very long time to make! Even if we got started right now, it wouldn’t be ready before nightfall!”

Abel and Nadir both nodded, looking very impressed by my explanation.

“Huh. I didn’t know it took that long,” Abel said.

“I thought it’d be a simple dish where all you had to do was grill the meat, but it sounds like it’s actually quite difficult,” Nadir added.

Seeing their reactions made me realize something: The two of them were nobles! They’d always had the best foods served to them on the spot!

“Um,” I began anxiously. “Do either of you have *any* experience with cooking?”

The two men blinked in unison.

“No.”

“Not really.”

Figured! We were supposed to be cooking as a group, but two out of three of us had no experience. Sure, they had the motivation, but they’d no doubt only get in the way. Whether the results were edible was entirely up to me!

I suddenly found myself saddled with a tremendous responsibility. Still, I couldn’t get out of this situation—Abel, who’d brought the ingredients, was standing right there. Some of those ingredients were perishable, and the thought of wasting food was unconscionable for me, given my humble origins.

“If we can’t do roast beef, how about roast chicken?” Nadir suggested.

“Same problem!” I retorted.

“Roast pork, then!” Abel offered.

“Same! Problem!”

With how off-the-mark their proposed alternatives were, I knew that if I left the two to their own devices, they’d definitely both go for overly

elaborate dishes. Which, of course! That was all they'd ever eaten!

"I'll show you how to make peasant food!" I said sharply, pointing a finger at them.

"Peasant..."

"...Food?"

I grinned at them, and the two gave me a perplexed look.

***

"We'll be making a staple of peasant food: sandwiches!"

I lined up the cutting board, a knife, and the necessary ingredients.

"We eat sandwiches too," Nadir pointed out.

"Yeah, we sure do," Abel agreed.

I shook my head. They didn't get it! "Your sandwiches are very much *not* peasant food," I said, taking a loaf of bread. "Peasant sandwiches would never have anything like your beloved roast beef."

Abel and Nadir both looked as though this were some sort of incredible revelation.

"N-No way!"

"Wh-What about foie gras?"

"Obviously no," I said. "The common folk can't afford something so outrageously expensive." They looked shocked once more. Maybe I'd managed to shake their noble mindset a little. "We'll just make standard fare," I continued. "It's fine. Peasants like easy-to-eat food, so these aren't difficult to make." I picked up a prewashed tomato. "Watch closely. You hold it like this so it doesn't slip, then slice it. Since it's for a sandwich, slice it thinly."

"Whoa," they said admiringly at my demonstration. I didn't normally get this kind of respect, so I was definitely enjoying myself.

"Anna!" Ben exclaimed. "Let me try!"

"You stay out of it, Ben," I told the butler. "Okay, Nadir, Abel, you have knives, right? Go ahead."

The two noblemen each took a knife, standing tensely next to one another. It hit me then how spacious this kitchen was, with ample room for two adults to stand side by side. Such a stark contrast to my family home.

Nadir placed a tomato on the cutting board and readied his knife.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Stop! Not like that!” I intervened in a hurry.

Nadir frowned at me. “What’s the issue?”

“Your hand! The way you’re holding the tomato is all wrong! You need to hold it with your hand like a cat’s paw so you don’t cut your fingers!” I desperately attempted to explain. “And the knife! Don’t raise it up so high! You’re not chopping through bone!” The way he’d been about to dramatically swing down his knife could’ve cost him a hand if he’d messed up!

“I can’t transform into a cat, Lady Brianna,” Abel said.

“Not literally!” I snapped. “Did you see me turn into a cat when I did it? No! Hold it like this!”

“True, you were indeed still in human form just now,” he mused. “So, like this?”

What did he mean, “still” in human form? I’d never been anything but human!

I took a look at Abel’s hand and gave him the go-ahead. He smiled happily at me, in the childlike way a boy being praised by his mother might. Weird.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll give it a go, then.”

“Don’t swing it up high. Do it like I just did. It doesn’t have to be fast.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding and cautiously slicing into the tomato. Wow, this household’s knives were so sharp! It sliced right through like it was cutting warm butter. “I did it!”

“Nicely done,” I praised him, and he seemed all too happy to continue slicing away.

Truthfully, those slices were entirely too thick, but for a first attempt, he’d done well. Relieved, I let out a sigh, pressing a hand to my chest. Then I sensed a pair of eyes watching me from behind.

I turned around slowly to find Nadir staring at me. “Why did you only give *him* instructions?” he asked.

“I mean, it’s more efficient to teach one person at a time,” I said, wishing he’d put down that knife for a second. That knife! “Now then, I’ll show you too—”

“It’s already done.”

“Huh?”

I hastily checked his cutting board and, indeed, there were neatly sliced

tomatoes, much thinner and better cut than Abel's.

"I watched you fuss over Abel and just copied what you were doing," he said sharply. A little too sharply.

"Y-You did great, Nadir!"

"Hmph." He picked up a cucumber and started deftly slicing it. "How's that?"

"Wha... Wow..." I couldn't believe how well he could handle the knife after just one lesson. This was the same man who'd been a complete menace only moments ago.

"Nadir's a fast learner," Abel said as he continued to work hard at cutting his tomato. "He only needs to be shown how to do things once."

Only once? What kind of limitless potential did the man have?

"Abel and I can handle this," Nadir said.

"Yeah," Abel agreed. "Shall we ask Lady Brianna to bake us some pastries, then?"

"Huh...?"

That was entirely too much responsibility for my frail heart.

"I mean, it'd be nice to have some baked treats," Abel mused. "Her Highness said they're great for tea after a meal too."

"R-Right," I stammered, managing to keep him unaware of the disarray I was in. Internally, I was sweating bullets. Cold, cold bullets. *Oh no. Oh no, no, no.*

While I was busy panicking, Ben, who had been pacing about, spoke up. "Oh, Anna can't bake. She's destroyed an oven before."

"I did no such thing!" I protested. "The pastries simply exploded inside it, rendering the oven unusable for a time!"

Gasping, I realized too late what I'd just said. I hesitantly looked over to Abel and Nadir, both of whom were smiling at me.

"We'd really like it if you could bake us some sweets."

"Indeed, I'd love to see it at least once."

"U-Urk..."

Faced with their intimidating grins, I had no choice but to nod.

Long story short, the oven exploded. The picnic, we decided, would have to happen some other time.

Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons: Volume 2 by Izumi Sawano

Translated by Camilla L.
Edited by Catherine Catlin

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

"KISAKI KYOIKU KARA NIGETAI WATASHI" 2
by Izumi Sawano
Copyright © Izumi Sawano All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published by SHUFU-TO-SEIKATSU SHA CO., LTD. Tokyo
This English edition is published by arrangement with SHUFU-TO-SEIKATSU SHA CO., LTD. Tokyo
English translation © 2023 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: November 2023
Premium E-Book for Marwen Ricky